

**Believing to Belong: Negotiation and Expression of American Identity  
at a Non-religious Summer Camp**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation presents results of ethnographic study at a non-religious summer camp called Camp Quest Montana in the summer of 2011 and the numerous insights gained into the lived experiences of non-religious Americans. These particular Americans, because of their non-religion, have experienced unique pressures while navigating through life in a country that is and has been dominated by religious identification and belief. The ethnographic accounts gathered over the course of a week at Camp Quest Montana show how these non-religious people were using a language of belief, informed by a spirituality derived from science, as part of an effort to fit themselves into this wider and religiously steeped American culture. This dissertation argues that the Camp Questers express themselves through a language of “belief” because of the current and historical pressures to be religious, along with Americans’ tendency to distrust non-religious people. Using “belief” language allows them to talk about themselves in a way that makes sense to religious Americans, while also maintaining a non-religious identification. Moreover, this study found differences between how first and second-generation non-religious Americans (the parents and children at Camp Quest Montana) interact with religious Americans. These variations are important because they point to different experiences of the social and cultural landscape of the United States, differences that are reflected in each generation’s non-religious expression. This data also presents a challenge to current arguments regarding the benefits of religion to the socialization and overall well-being of youth.

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The sun rises over a picturesque lakeside home in Montana. It shines down on a group of people just beginning their day. Breakfast is being cooked. Children are still groggy with sleep. The older children are helping out by wrangling the more lethargic youngsters. Breakfast is served. People find their places near their parents, spouses, or new friends. Everyone eats their fill because they know that the day in store will be full of activities like swimming, knee boarding, and crafts. The awkward moments when strangers meet and long days of travelling are behind them and this group is ready to start having fun and make new friends.

This scene depicts a normal day at summer camp, but this camp, called Camp Quest Montana, is different than the majority of camps in the United States. These particular campers have come to this camp because they have explicitly rejected any identification with religious belief, or have never thought of themselves as belonging to a religion. They have come to this quiet Montana town to spend time with other people who are living in an America that struggles to understand their lack of religious sentiment. This camp and others like it have become places where these non-religious Americans can express themselves freely; expressions that provide insights into how they view themselves and the country in which they live.

The ethnographic study of the non-religious individuals carried out at Camp Quest Montana in the summer of 2011 provides numerous insights into the lived experiences of non-religious people in the United States. They have been navigating through life in a country that is and has been dominated by religious identification and belief. A relational understanding of the expressions found at this camp, exposes how this situation has created a unique expression of

non-religion in these particular Americans. The identities and expressions made by the people at Camp Quest Montana have taken on characteristics that emphasize the communication of beliefs that are founded in the campers' explicit assertions of their scientifically derived spirituality. Developing these tools has enabled the young people at Camp Quest to express their non-religion openly with friends and religious peers and these experiences reveal a larger dialogue regarding the nature of a wider American identity that is tolerant and accepting.

In its early stages, the study of non-religion focused on learning about why people left religious institutions. One intention of these early studies was to learn about non-religious people in order to bring them back into the religious fold. These investigations also posited that these non-religious people were simply being religious in a different way that did not fit into standard definitions (cf. Bellah 1971; Glock 1971; Luckmann 1971). The field has developed and grown, perhaps due to its inherent interdisciplinary approach or, at the very least, the subject matter's openness to being studied from multiple or simultaneous disciplines. However, as this field has matured there remains a gap concerning the everyday lives of non-religious people, particularly work that includes young people, over research that focuses on the writings of a few vocal ideologues and public figures like Richard Dawkins and the other Four Horsemen of Atheism. This thesis seeks to add to the discussion by investigating how one summer camp designed and run by non-religious people and for the children of non-religious people acts as an important facet in the construction and maintenance of a non-religious American identity for this group. This is a small-scale study, so any attempt at generalizations from the data will be tentative and come with quite a few reservations (Byers and Tastsoglou 2008, 11), but the results nevertheless point to an important aspect of what it means to be non-religious in the United States.

Ethnographic study of non-religious ideas and how non-religious people interact with those ideas can reveal the limitations of works that focus on the ideological or philosophical approaches to modern non-religion. These approaches are based on limited sources and tacitly assume all non-religious people to be antagonistic towards religious belief. Fomenting the popularity of these approaches are best-selling books by non-religious authors like Richard Dawkins who vocally promote a particular form of atheism displaying a fierce antagonism towards religious belief and strongly questioning the existence of God/s. Dawkins, along with other modern non-religious authors, represent only a small fraction of the potential ways that non-religious identities and ideas can be communicated and incorporated into a non-religious life. It is unwarranted to discuss a whole group of individuals as if they exactly mirror a small but vocal portion of their community. Meanwhile, those who consider themselves non-religious, or whatever term that they self-identify with, have been living their lives informed by perspectives that may be invisible to these weighty discussions concerning the somewhat limited category of “atheism.” Research that shines light onto how non-religious ideas are put into practice is necessary in order to better understand the individual and social qualities and characteristics of the experiences of people who are not religious in the United States. This thesis uses ethnographic methods to find and analyze the current state of non-religious *life* and *practice* in the United States, what sources and influences inform and form the tapestry of this life, how these lived experiences are communicated within the non-religious community, and what affects these experiences have on our understanding of American identity, whether that identity be religious or non-religious.

Using an anthropological approach, I began participant observation at Camp Quest Montana in the summer of 2011. Focusing on gaining qualitative data, I spent most of my time

observing the participants, but did engage in informal interviews whenever possible, as well as organizing group discussions, one with the adults and another with the teenagers. While performing ethnographic research at this summer camp designed for non-religious families I observed that these individuals were developing ways to explicitly express their non-religious beliefs. These are founded upon the belief that scientific discovery has shown there to be deep connections between all life and matter. From this foundation, the Camp Questers have formed and express beliefs in a need for compassion and tolerance towards all people, a deep respect for the environment, and the belief that this life is all important because of an agnostic attitude towards the afterlife. Embedded in each of these is the rejection of ideological certainty that includes the results of scientific discovery as well as religious claims.

The beliefs of the campers have an explicit spiritual component for the people at Camp Quest Montana that is based on the scientific understanding of the interconnection of all matter and organic life. Through their spiritual experience of the universe, gained through an understanding of science, the Camp Questers are entering into a dialogue with religious Americans. A group of people who have given up religion or never associated themselves with any form of religious belonging discussing shared beliefs, spiritual or otherwise, may seem strange to an outside observer. I argue that this phenomenon is in fact a response generated out of the common experiences created through everyday interaction with religious Americans as well as a general inclination towards religious identification in the United States. In their everyday lives, the people who attended Camp Quest Montana are almost constantly confronted with questions about their religiosity and feel pressured to have some sort of religious identity. They have come to feel that their neighbours, teachers, colleagues, and peers think that there is some gap or chasm in their hearts where religion should reside. This is an impression that the campers

hope to rectify. The expression of beliefs, which are formed in response to both implicit and explicit pressures, serve to help these individuals reconcile their identification as fully American with their observation that most Americans are deeply and openly religious.

The beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana and their spiritual foundations are only the beginning of this complex issue. Areas of tension between these campers and their religious neighbours expose broader questions concerning the authority and authenticity of an American identity that values tolerance, individualism, and equality, each of which are developed by the Camp Questers through their beliefs. The results from studying these non-religious campers corroborates much of the research on American identity as well as exposing how we should be cautious in categorizing the tensions between non-religious and religious Americans in academic literature as a conflict that is solely about religion. Many other factors influence these tensions, one of which is the negotiation and maintenance of American identity and discussions that focus on the religious element of these conflicts may obscure the motivations behind such conflicts. Also, there are differences in how the children and adults at Camp Quest Montana experience and express their non-religion. The adults show a marked antagonism between themselves and religion in general that results in a tendency to remain closeted in expressing their non-religion, while the younger generation shows a tendency towards engagement with their religious peers and strives to openly express the non-religious aspects of their identities. With each generation adopting different levels of engagement with their religious peers, the tensions that they encounter also differ. Based on my observations, I maintain that these differences are a direct result of each generation's experiences of America. Experiences that led to the parents feeling that they had to reject the established religion of their families while the younger generation

grew up in non-religious households that were supportive and provided the tools with which to develop the non-religious aspects of their identities and feel confident in their expression.

## **1. Research Questions**

The United States of America is ostensibly a secular country. Their government is limited in how it deals with religion by an Amendment to the country's Constitution. The power of the state and religious sentiment are, at least technically, supposed to remain separate. But rather than create a situation where religion slowly fades in the hearts and minds of the populace, the United States is a country where religions and religious beliefs have thrived within this secular environment, with Americans being some of the most religious people in the world. The religiousness of the United States is reflected in the Pew Forum's 2008 *U.S. Religious Landscape Survey* which found that over 78 per cent of the U.S. adult population identified as some form of Christian while another 4.7 per cent belong to non-Christian religious groups (Pew Research Institute 2008, 10). The most recent *Religious Landscape Survey* published in 2015 found this number to have decreased to 70.6% with non-Christian faiths rising to 5.9% (Pew Research Institute 2015, 4). This leads us to question how non-religious Americans navigate the processes of identity formation in a country filled with religious people, religious imagery, and religious rhetoric.

This research seeks to situate this particular Camp Quest and the experiences and expressions found there within the larger socio-cultural context of the United States. Of primary interest is how these non-religious people interact with their families and other non-religious people. That examination is extended to include how this small group relates to religions, religious individuals, and religious organizations, and what kind of lived experiences develop out

of these relationships. Of particular interest are how techniques that involve a discourse of belief are utilized to overcome challenges encountered as a result of their non-religion, how the activities at a summer camp can help develop those beliefs as part of a non-religious identity for youths, and how the Camp Questers enact that identity in the world. This thesis strives to answer the question of how these non-religious Americans experience their country through the lens of their non-religion and what techniques they use to move through the social landscape of what is, arguably, one of the most religious, yet still secular, Western country in the world.

I argue that the incorporation of a discourse that involves the language of beliefs is an implicit strategy that stems out of a reaction to the ubiquity of religious sentiment in the United States. This ubiquity includes, but is not limited to, the assumption of religious belief as part of an American identity, the linking of religiousness with morality, and the presence of religious language in politics. Most important are the normative pressures to be religious that result when these factors combine in everyday conversation with religious Americans and religiousness becomes entangled with a legitimate American identity. The concept of identity complicates this analysis in that the specific areas of tension between the non-religious people at Camp Quest Montana and their religious peers show that these tensions may be caused, not by religion, per se, but by the complex contemporary and historical construction of an American national identity.

## **2. Definitions**

Most of the people at Camp Quest Montana preferred to think of themselves as “Freethinkers,” but the Camp Questers also self-identified as “atheists,” “agnostics,” “sceptics,” and simply “thinkers.” As no single and definitive term was consistently used by the Camp

Questers to describe themselves, throughout this thesis I will use the much more general terms, taken from the work of Lois Lee, ‘non-religion’ or ‘non-religious’ when describing the people at Camp Quest. These terms only apply to the analytical level rather than the descriptive level of discussion, because participants did not use them. Therefore, any categorization of the data gained at Camp Quest as non-religious is only with the understanding that these non-religious phenomena are not observed directly, but instead determined based on the evidence of beliefs, actions, and experiences and then categorized as such by the researcher (Beckford 2008, 21). The beliefs themselves are not observable, so I only report the words, expressions, and actions motivated by said beliefs. However, categorization is necessary, if inherently tentative, and Lee defines non-religion as ‘any position, perspective or practice which is primarily defined by, or in relation to, religion, but which is nevertheless considered to be other than religious’ (Lee 2012, 131) by the people studied. In Lee’s definition we move away from notions of hostility or indifference to religion, though these are still important and present in many non-religious groups and expressions, and focus on the ways in which the non-religious differentiate themselves from their religious peers (Lee 2012, 131). Analytically, this limits the scope of study because, technically, almost everything that was not specifically considered religious could be studied within the study of non-religion. This is not my intention. Instead, Lee’s definition creates a field where we observe phenomena where religion is involved, however tangentially, and religion is a factor in the self-definition of individuals and groups. In other words, the study of non-religion is involved where people define themselves in full or partial contrast to religion and religious believers. Also, Campbell’s work encouraged those studying non-religion, or ‘irreligion’ in his terms, to understand non-religious expression as a response to the religious environment (Campbell 1971, 21), or, more specifically, how that environment is perceived to be

by the non-religious. When a person is defined as non-religious, their non-religion is held up against the religious beliefs and practices of their neighbours as well as their conceptualization of religion as a whole, thus making their experiences meaningful for an understanding of the general culture and society of the United States.

### **3. A Brief History of Summer Camps and Camp Quest**

Summer camps have been an established part of American life since the latter parts of the nineteenth century and in order to fully grasp what Camp Quest Montana is, or, what any non-religious summer camp is, it is beneficial to understand the place that summer camps have filled in the American cultural landscape. Each year more than ‘10 million North American children will experience the simple pleasures of summer camp’ (Van Slyck 2006, xix). The first modern camps that would be recognizable as summer camps were introduced to American youth as part of a ‘back-to-nature’ trend and were initially intended to provide ‘respite from what were regarded as the moral and physical degradations of urban life, evils to which women and children were understood to be particularly prone’ (Van Slyck 2006, xix). One of the first official summer camps in the United States was created to initiate ‘boys to the trials of manhood as a team and individual effort’ (Gilborn 2000, xxvii). Nature, and the unmediated experience of it, was thought to have restorative properties and was conceptualized as being essential to the formation of good Americans. However, these camps were artificial creations and, in fact, reflected a cultural construction of the “natural world” formed in the late nineteenth century (Van Slyck 2006, xx).

Camps were created as places that were essentially impermanent and the campers could be thought of as ‘sojourners who stay a day or a week or even a summer but in time move on for

another destination or to resume a workaday life at home' (Gilborn 2000, xxv). For many Americans, camp became a '*place* more than... a cabin or tent' (Gilborn 2000, xxv, emphasis in original). In essence, camps were intended to be wholly in tune with nature, but instead were experiences that mirrored expectations of what an ideal childhood could and should be. Camps helped invent a particular version of childhood that was socially and culturally situated as well as being a reflection of the fears and hopes of the adults who created them (Van Slyck 2006, xxi). In the post-war era, 'summer camp became an increasingly common enhancement activity for middle-class children, as well as a welcome break for their parents, who were devoting so much of their time and energy to child-rearing responsibilities' (Van Slyck 2006, xxvi). However, the 1960s saw the decline of traditional camps that sought to expose children to the natural world and the rise of camps that taught special skills (Van Slyck 2006, xxvii). This included the creation of camps that were specifically tailored to activities like sports, or science. It was out of this context that Camp Quest emerged.

The primary data for this thesis was gathered at Camp Quest Montana, but this is only one of a number of Camp Quests that operate throughout the United States as well as internationally. Camp Quests, generally, were formed for 'children from atheist, agnostic, humanist, and other freethinking families' (Camp Quest History; Camp Quest Press). These camps are coordinated through Camp Quest Inc. which describes itself as an 'umbrella organization supporting all of the Camp Quest camps in North America' (Camp Quest History). Despite Camp Quest Inc.'s organizational support, each Camp Quest can be unique and the organizers of each respective camp determine their character.

The first Camp Quest convened in 1996 in Boone County, Kentucky, but after two years moved to Ohio (Camp Quest History; Clark 2006). The reasoning behind the formation of Camp

Quest was the increasing enforcement of a policy by Boy Scouts of America that required each camper to profess their belief in a God (Camp Quest History). To this day, Boy Scouts of America states that though they ‘do not require membership in a religious organization or association for enrolment [sic]’ they do prefer and strongly encourage ‘membership and participation in the religious programs and activities of a church, synagogue, or other religious association’ (BSA Religious Principles). Many non-religious Americans wanted to share in an experience of nature, but the Boy Scouts of America’s insistence that Scouts have some form of religion was too restrictive. Finding this situation unacceptable for nontheistic families, a small group from the Free Inquiry Group of Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky, led by Edwin and Helen Kagin, decided to create Camp Quest (Camp Quest History). This camp continued for several years until it became apparent that more were needed to fill the demand for non-religious camps. These new camps, beginning with Camp Quest Smoky Mountains in Tennessee, began in 2002 and by 2006 there were six Camp Quests in operation (Camp Quest History). All of these camps were independently operated, but were supported by Camp Quest Inc. At the time of writing, the total number of Camp Quests in the United States was eighteen with one camp in Switzerland and two in the United Kingdom (Camp Quest Home). Camp Quest became so popular that in 2006 it was even mentioned as part of a segment on the Colbert Report (Colbert Report 2006), a hugely popular satirical television program.

Camp Quest Montana’s format deviated slightly from Camp Quests in other areas. For other Camp Quests the standard practice was for children to be dropped off at the start of camp and then picked up after one week. Camp Quest Montana, however, was created specifically as a family camp where both parents and children of all ages could come and stay for the entire week. At the time this was the only Camp Quest that followed this format. The two people most

responsible for the organizing and family focus of Camp Quest Montana were Abby and Liz. The two had met at a camp the previous year where they had both managed to stay at the camp even though it was not a family camp. This camp was called Camp Inquiry, which is a similar camp to Camp Quest, but is run by The Centre for Inquiry. They bonded over their general shared dislike of the camp's message and format and resolved to form a different kind of camp the next summer. This is how the camp came to be held at Abby's Montana lake-house. Abby is an outspoken and charismatic woman who immediately struck me as "feisty" and someone who, by sheer force of will, could accomplish anything. She had recently started her own small business and encouraged the children to engage in arts and crafts whenever possible. Abby came from a Catholic family but never really 'got' religion as a child. She asked questions about her family's Catholic faith, but was never truly satisfied with the answers that her family, or Catholicism in general, provided. She recounted often how growing up with a religious background had created difficulties dealing with former acquaintances and friends. Abby believed that her friends wrongfully interpreted her leaving religion as something having 'happened to us,' that was so traumatic that they felt a need to leave their religious communities. It was so inconceivable to Abby's friends that she would leave her religion behind that they assumed some form of life-changing event when really it was just an expression of Abby's long-held sentiments.

Liz also grew up in a Catholic household. She was a tall woman who could only be described as "willowy." Liz espoused a live-and-let-live attitude to her own beliefs and the beliefs of others that mirrored Abby's, saying that a person '[c]an't tell someone what to believe.' Liz enjoys discussing her non-religion with other non-religious people, but her experience was described as one where she didn't have many people to talk to and that she was

‘pretty much in the closet,’ meaning that Liz was reluctant to discuss the fact that she was not religious with her religious friends and neighbours. Liz said that she was intensely dissatisfied with the experience at Camp Inquiry the previous year because she felt that her children’s experience of Camp Inquiry had left them cynical and that Camp Inquiry stripped all forms of belief from people, encouraging a strictly sceptical attitude. She is a more soft-spoken person than Abby, but the two complement each other in that they are goal and detail oriented and work well together.

#### **4. Description of Participants**

The camp itself was relatively small, with only 19 attendees in total. There were nine parents (four men, five women) including one parent’s significant other (not related to an attending child). One parent was not able to stay at the camp for the duration, but is included in this study. Every adult was Caucasian and a native of the United States. Occupations varied within the group, ranging from a lawyer, software engineers, a retired engineer, a small business owner, and a doctor. The incomes of the participants were not recorded, but based on their descriptions of their home lives each of the families could easily be categorized as white-collar middle class Americans. The children who attended Camp Quest this year also consisted of a wide range of ages. There were three children (two boys, one girl) ranging from 5-9 years old, five children who were between 10 and 14 (three boys, two girls), and two who were between the ages of 15 and 17 (both boys)<sup>1</sup>. Each family was from a different part of the United States with families travelling from Michigan, the Pacific Northwest, Texas, and Montana. Four of the parents mentioned that they had grown up in or around New York City and had subsequently

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<sup>1</sup> These age categories were created as part of the process of obtaining approval from the Research Ethics Board of the University of Ottawa and were not determined by the camp itself.

moved to their current areas of residence. Another important feature of the parents at Camp Quest was that all but three of them had come from Catholic backgrounds.

## **5. Methodology**

The question arises as to what the study of non-religious phenomena can provide to the understanding of religion, or conversely, what can a person trained in the study of religion contribute to the understanding of non-religion? By studying non-religion we gain a glimpse inside the environment in which both non-religious and religious phenomena are operating. Through investigation into how non-religious people understand themselves in relation to the religion that surrounds them we can better understand the entirety of that environment.

The methodology utilized for this project was predominantly ethnographic because such techniques require the adoption of a manner that acclimatizes participants to my presence while also being as unobtrusive to the experience as possible. Any environment that requires an intensive timeline of continuous social observation is fraught with potential barriers between researcher and participant. Adopting an ethnographic approach provided the tools and perspective necessary to ease the transition from my status as outside observer to at least a limited form of participant. Though the participant-researcher distinction must be maintained to a certain degree, it is beneficial to become a trusted member of this small and temporary community. Ethnography, which can be understood as the obtaining of data through first-hand cultural investigation (Spradley and McCurdy 1988, 3) in order to re-examine taken-for-granted features or characteristics of a given culture or group (Spradley and McCurdy 1988, 4), facilitated the process of integrating myself into the camp community. Utilizing ethnographic techniques required that I have individual discussions with participants, which was a necessary

step in gaining a current picture of their particular form or expression of non-religion. An ethnographic approach is valuable in determining how individuals who consider themselves non-religious actually understand that self-identification as well as providing on-the-ground data for how they form their views, including but not limited to lived experiences, the influence of current or historical authors, friends, and family members.

I participated in as many of the daily activities of camp life as possible in order to become a familiar face. This familiarity created two benefits. The first is that my participants acted in as normal a way as possible, minimizing the effects of my presence on the results. The second is that I was present to recognize and capitalize on opportunities to transition informal conversations overheard, or I was an active participant in, into more formal interviews (Mooney 2009, 231). Ensuring the maximum opportunity for this kind of embedded study involved organizing accommodation at the camp for myself rather than staying off-site and commuting to the camp everyday. This choice was made because in ethnographic research it is vital to be flexible and available to pursue interviews and opportunities for data gathering which requires a researcher to actually be present when activities are happening. Also, the results that can come simply from openness and presence at camp activities builds trust which is the first step in getting the campers to open up about their experiences.

### *5.1 Recruitment*

In the initial stages of planning, emails were sent to multiple branches of Camp Quest. The camps contacted in the United States were Texas, Michigan, and Montana. The only Camp Quest in Canada was contacted multiple times via email, but no reply was received. Montana was chosen for two reasons. The first reason being that Montana's camp was the only Camp

Quest at that time where the families of the children could also attend. This allowed for broader access to participants of different ages and life-stages, as well as providing a better idea of the average home-life of the children through their interactions with their parents. The second reason was that the organizers were enthusiastic that I attend that year's camp rather than wait a year until the 2012 summer season. Recruitment of participants for this project began with an introductory email that spelled out who I was and what the goals of my research were. This email was sent to each person attending by the Camp Organizer before the beginning of camp. Once campers arrived at the site, I approached them in person and presented a summary of the introduction provided in the email. It was good that I repeated the contents of the email because many had not yet read the introduction letter. This conversation also served to inform them of the nature and content of the consent documents. They were each asked if and to what degree they would like to participate. All parents and children agreed to participate fully in my project with only one adult asking not to be filmed but allowing for observations and quotes to be used.

### *5.2 Logistics of Data Collection*

For the most part, data was recorded at Camp Quest Montana using hand-written notes. These consisted mostly of particular phrasings that the campers used to describe themselves or were particularly interesting and needed to be recorded as close to verbatim as possible. I tried, when possible, not to take notes during my time at camp. Whenever I did take out a notebook, the campers noticed and became interested more in what I was writing down than being open about themselves. For that reason, notes were usually made after everyone had settled down for the night and I could collect my thoughts. An audio recorder was used during formal planned presentations as well as during formal group discussions.

As part of my data collection at Camp Quest, I arranged for two formal group discussions, as well as those informal discussions that occurred as part of regular camp activities. The first group discussion was with the teenagers at camp, while the second was with the adults. The formal group discussions were documented using a digital recorder as well as hand-written notes and loosely structured around a list of questions that were pre-prepared (Mooney 2009, 232). As my intention was for these discussions to be participant-led these questions were open-ended. For example, the first questions were “How are you enjoying Camp Quest Montana so far?” and “Why did you choose to come to Camp Quest Montana?” The campers would begin by answering the specific question asked, but the resulting discussion often diverged into much larger discussions that form the bulk of my data. These discussions were able to shift focus and direction as the Camp Questers began to talk about non-religion, religion, and their experiences at camp. Subjects were allowed to talk about what is interesting *for them*, as this presented data that was unexpected, and pointed to more productive and unpredictable avenues of study.

### 5.3 Ethics

The ethical concerns in this study were considerable as this work involved teenagers and young children. Also, as stated earlier, these non-religious campers already felt themselves to be a somewhat embattled minority in the United States. Efforts had to be taken to ensure the informed consent of all participants and the comfort of all people involved. Part of the concerns when dealing with human subjects is the maintenance of the anonymity of the participants, should they choose to remain so. Of primary concern was ensuring that this study did not inflict any harm on the research participants both during and after fieldwork. The eight adults who attended the camp were informed that their participation was completely voluntary and that they

could remove their consent, if given, at any time. This consent translated into the same protections and conditions for their children. These parents were also asked to sign consent forms on behalf of their children before any information gained from observation or conversation with these children could be used. The children themselves were broken up into two groups based on age. After consent was given by the parents, on their children's behalf, the six teenagers (aged 12-17) were asked to sign assent forms that had similar wording to the adult consent forms. The language was simplified in order to be easier to understand, but only slightly. For the four children younger than 12 the assent forms were worded very simply in order for the form's contents to be understood. These assent forms informed the children that there would be no negative repercussions if they did not participate, nor would there be any camp activities that they could not participate in should they choose not to sign the forms. If they gave their assent to participate they were told that they could remove that assent at any time. All efforts were made to ensure that participants, regardless of their age, felt empowered and in control of the data being collected and that their decision to participate or their refusal to do so would not close their abilities to enjoy any camp activities.

Through the creation of this open and informal atmosphere, the children found that they were at ease and therefore open to discussing their non-religious beliefs with each other and with myself. This casual atmosphere also allowed for less intrusive observation than may have been the case with other camps, and created an attitude that was receptive to questions concerning what actually constitutes their non-religion.

## 6. Theoretical Frameworks

The field of the Anthropology of Religion informs much of this thesis. This presents unique problems because there is a difficulty in using a discipline that was developed to better analyse religious phenomena rather than to study non-religion. This difficulty stems out of the historical roots of the social-scientific study of religion. A specific issue develops from the dualistic understanding of religious phenomena found in such notable authors as Emile Durkheim, Peter Berger, and Mary Douglas. The foundation that these thinkers built has created an academic gaze that sees non-religious phenomena as either something completely out of the purview of the anthropology of religion (Marx 2007; Freud 1961; Freud 1950), representative of a group of people who may someday become religious (James 1982, 205), or some form of yet undiscovered religious expression (Müller 1977, 15). Each of these approaches conceals the nuance and variety of non-religious phenomena. It is my intention here to adopt much of the theoretical foundations of the anthropology of religion, along with modern anthropological theories, and synthesize them with the study of non-religion. This can be accomplished and the study of non-religion benefits from the merger by gaining a theoretical tradition that augments how non-religion is being studied currently.

### *6.1 Anthropology of Religion*

The anthropology of religion has been fascinated with the ways that humans experience the world around them, particularly how that experience is both shaped by and shapes conceptions of the intangible, the preterhuman, the supernatural, the divine, in other words, how different peoples have been and are religious. Every theorist in this field has had to contend with the inherent problem of any social-scientific endeavor: that the workings of an individual's mind

are opaque to an observer. Early practitioners of this field tried to better understand the human experience through a reification of religion, conceptualizing it as a unifying experience that spanned human history. This assumption was eventually challenged with new paradigms being introduced that forced the anthropology of religion to look closely at itself, its sources, and its colonial past. As the field adapted or discarded its assumptions about religion, culture, and even history, certain trends have developed, but each shift of theoretical perspective retained elements of their predecessors, and the seeds of those yet to come.

The main difference between anthropological and theological approaches to religion is that within the anthropology of religion it is generally assumed that humans create religion. This theoretical approach was generated and supported by the theories of Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud. Marx understood religion to be created by humans to provide a sense of worth and belonging in a world that was meaningless (Marx 2007, 9). In other words, Marx understood religion as something that made humans feel better in a terrible world. Freud, writing decades after Marx, used his theories about psychoanalysis to conclude that humans created religions in order to reconcile themselves with their relative powerlessness, based on a model of a divine father figure (Freud 1961, 24; Freud 1950, 166).<sup>2</sup> For Freud, supernatural figures ‘must exorcize the terrors of nature, they must reconcile men to the cruelly [sic] of Fate, particularly as it is shown in death, and they must compensate them for the sufferings and privations’ of life (Freud 1961, 18). Marx and Freud utilized this perspective to promote the dissolution of all religion.

Other influential theorists in the anthropology of religion abandoned that approach as they investigated religions as part of a universal human experience. To accomplish this goal, E.B. Tylor, James Frazer, and Emile Durkheim accessed data on historical and current religions

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<sup>2</sup> This statement is echoed by one of the campers in a later chapter.

to better understand the roots of human religious experience by studying the nuances, differences, and similarities in religions across the world.

The work of E.B. Tylor and James Frazer, each referenced in Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1950), are expressions of a viewpoint that was largely interested in

so-called primitive societies and their customs because they saw these as representing earlier stages of civilization, antedating our historical knowledge of early European society, from which there had been steady progress up to the high peak of Victorian civilization (Gluckman 1984, 2).

These men and their early studies into the anthropology of religion were motivated by a drive to find the most basic foundational part of all religions in order to understand modern Christianity.

Within this school of thought, Tylor and Frazer were two of the first theorists to develop the analytical possibilities regarding the human generation of religion. They both held a

universalized conception of religion, presenting it as existing in all human societies. They developed these theories based on data gathered from archaeologists, missionaries, and traders.

In *Primitive Culture* (1920), originally published in 1871, Tylor developed a comparative evolutionary approach that argued the state of religion in “lower” or “rude” cultures provided access to the most basic pieces of religions found in “higher” or advanced cultures, namely

European ones.<sup>3</sup> Tylor's argument was that all humans face the same general categories of

problems that can only be addressed and ameliorated by gods/deities/spirits and the practices that surround them (Tylor, 1920, 54). The similarities meant that, for Tylor, practices and beliefs

could move from culture to culture. However, they may not remain static during this

transmission. They are changed according to the specific historical character of each distinct group.

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<sup>3</sup> Franz Boas challenged the division between “lower” and “higher” cultures and argued that this perspective placed value judgments on non-European societies. He proposed an approach that prioritized the cultural environment that placed all peoples on the same biological footing (Boas 1939, 143).

In *The Golden Bough* (1894) Frazer, influenced by Tylor, investigated the practices carried out in the Arician Grove, a lake found in Italy. Little was known about the rites practiced in the Grove, but, employing his universalizing approach, Frazer analytically reconstituted those extinct practices based on current religious practices. Frazer conceptualized religions as progressing from “savage” to “civilized,” while also applying the element of diffusion, arguing that shared features of religions in Europe must have come from a single religion from the area’s past. However, both Tylor and Frazer were engaged in thought experiments based on second-hand or even third-hand information of spurious authenticity and authority. They both tried to place themselves in the mindset of these so-called primitive people and explore their world from that perspective. They each used skilful reconstructions of piecemeal beliefs but these early anthropologists

[did] not seem to have realized that there was this bias in the books they conned for their facts. And they proceeded often to increase the bias by selecting only those facts which were directly relevant to their own problem: in the study of primitive religion and magic or of primitive mentality, they took the facts about mystical beliefs and ritual practice without weighing them adequately against secular belief and practice. They assembled not only oddments for interpretation, but oddments already selected haphazardly and then culled at random (Gluckman 1984, 21).

The conclusions derived from research of this type had more to do with the reasoning of the researchers rather than provide an authentic portrayal or analysis of human culture from history. Changes came when the types of data gathered by anthropologists changed. As more and more natural scientists were drawn into the field of anthropology, data now came from ‘direct careful and comprehensive observation of life in tribal society’ (Gluckman 1984, 22, 23).

Arnold Van Gennep, in his *The Rites of Passage* (1960), elaborated upon the work of Tylor and Frazer advancing the concept of the liminal by focusing on the processes involved in religious ritual. Van Gennep defined rites of passage as events or ceremonies ‘whose essential

purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well defined' (Van Gennep 1960, 3). For Van Gennep, 'the liminal' was a period which existed between these two distinct states of being and was unique to the ritual process. This was important to the study of religion because Van Gennep was investigating the mechanisms through which an individual is shaped by and shapes their surrounding society. In *The Ritual Process* (2008) Victor Turner further developed Van Gennep's concept of liminality by investigating the feelings of belonging created by ritual, calling this positive feeling 'communitas' (Turner 2008, 96). This process, through a reciprocal relationship, creates positive feelings in the lowest members of society by temporarily making them higher than, or at least equal to, those who occupy the highest (Turner 2008, 97). Communitas, according to Turner, cemented social stratification by temporarily inverting hierarchies during a ritual.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1915) Durkheim continued to develop the universalized conceptualization of religion: arguing that the study of religion is actually the study of a representation of society, a representation that then informs the identity of the individual. As part of his study into the totemism of Australian Aborigines, he recognized that the inherent problem with studying humans was that their internal worlds, their thoughts, were not accessible to an observer (except through an admittedly limited observation of their actions) and that this was also a problem for people in their interpersonal interactions. If the internal mind of an individual is not accessible except through social interaction then, Durkheim theorized, the function of religious rites was to minimize the differences between these individual consciousnesses, creating a *sense* of shared reality that then *becomes* a shared reality (Durkheim 1915, 16). The strength of Durkheim's work was that it found a balance between the

individuality of the human mind and the necessity of a cohesive social group while also turning that tension into an analytically rich area of study.

Durkheim provided an important foundation for the acceptance and respect typical of the anthropology of religion for practitioners' or insiders' perspectives on the world/s around them, a stance that was further developed by Bronislaw Malinowski, E. Evans-Pritchard, and Max Weber. Durkheim's major contribution to the anthropology of religion was that he introduced thinking where logical inconsistencies and paradoxes within a religious system could be perfectly reasonable features. This meant that religions survived because even when there were features that could be thought of as errors or inconsistencies these same features were '*true practically*' (Durkheim 1915, 80, emphasis in original). In *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1966), Bronislaw Malinowski furthered this interpretive stance stating that becoming an ethnographer required a person to 'find out that certain activities, which at first sight might appear incoherent and not correlated, have a meaning' (Malinowski 1966, 84). Malinowski broke away from the early techniques of anthropology that took isolated facts that had been torn from their original context and instead recorded facts in their full complexity and context (Gluckman 1984, 26). Continuing Durkheim's approach of balancing the internal mind with the social human, Malinowski conceived of a way to learn about how the individual was shaped through being and living in a society. He argued that, on an individual level, we are all implicitly channelled into our lives through social interaction, meaning that to understand the person you must understand the social environment that a person exists in. Malinowski and Durkheim each sought the ways that individuals and groups interact to form both the experience of the individual and the unity of the group.

Evans-Pritchard and Weber exposed the many productive areas of study possible when the European tendency to scoff or diminish the practices of non-Europeans is removed from academic perspectives, with Weber even turning his gaze towards modern Europeans. In Evans-Pritchard's 1937 work *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic Among the Azande* (republished in 1976), which focused on an African tribal people's use of oracles to root out witchcraft, he challenged the view that saw non-Europeans as irrational or superstitious. He presented them as realistic, rational, and holders of an internally logical and consistent worldview (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 30).

The work of Max Weber also contains this respect for the variety of ways that humans can interpret the world, theorizing that there are many fields of human activity and each one 'may be rationalized in terms of very different ultimate values and ends, and what is rational from one point of view may well be irrational from another' (Weber 1950, 26). Also, Weber's greatest insight was to use a study of Protestant Christianity in Europe to understand how religious ideas and institutions actually shaped the European expression of modernity, as part of a 'complex interaction of innumerable different historical factors' (Weber 1950, 90).

The early nineteenth century theorists as well as their twentieth century peers were beginning to investigate the analytical paths that were possible when religion is conceptualized as being human-created. This was and remains the single-most important addition to the study of the various ways that humans navigate their worlds. I should point out that this conceptualization does not exclude the possibility of a divinity or the supernatural, but focuses analysis onto the level of humans and the societies that they create rather than making qualitative statements about the nature of a supernatural entity or existence (a project which they consider to be the exclusive prerogative of theologians). However, with the exception of Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard,

these early theorists did not perform work in the field. They used data collected through (potentially inaccurate) sources to develop broad sweeping analyses; a practice critiqued by Ruth Benedict in *Patterns of Culture* as detrimental to the understanding of human beings and their religions (Benedict 1934, 48).

Clifford Geertz' work in *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973), is perhaps the culmination of the trajectory set by previous work in the anthropology of religion while also critiquing many of the assumptions found within. Geertz, following the work of Franz Boas (1962), portrays humans as being of universal mental capabilities. He also developed theories about the importance of the cultural in shaping the extreme variation of human experience (an idea also found in Margaret Mead's 1928 book *Coming of Age in Samoa*). Following the work of Malinowski, Geertz theorized that culture was so important in creating what we recognize as a human experience of the world that humans who were not shaped by cultural forces could not exist, or at least would not be recognizably human (Geertz 1973, 35). Geertz challenged the universalism found in Marx, Freud, Tylor, and Frazer, rejecting any search for a primal religion. He argued that generalizations could be made about religions, but that they could not be used to create some concept of a '*consensus gentium* that does not in fact exist' (Geertz 1973, 40 emphasis in original). This perspective forced scholars in the anthropology of religion to look at each religious system or phenomenon within its own environment rather than engage in a comparative enterprise searching for the basic elements of religion.

Geertz, developing a methodology that built on the work of Durkheim and Malinowski, emphasized symbols as the way that humans created and maintained their views about themselves and the world around them. He stated that it is 'through culture patterns, ordered clusters of significant symbols, that man makes sense of the events through which he lives'

(Geertz 1973, 363). Symbols and their systems were necessary because the actual world is inherently difficult to understand (Geertz 1973, 140-141). This perspective expanded the analytical utility of the study of religion because religion, with its emphasis on the sacred, does not describe the social order, but shapes it by means of sacred symbols functioning

to synthesize a people's ethos—the tone, character, and quality of their life, its moral and aesthetic style and mood—and their world view—the picture they have of the way things in sheer actuality are, their most comprehensive ideas of order (Geertz 1973, 89, 121).

Though this was a useful way of looking at religious phenomena, it does rely completely on the assumption that humans cannot understand the world around them, an assumption that can lead to a devaluation of that internally logical and coherent symbolic reality.

Geertz' work is perhaps the pinnacle of the field's "old guard" that thought there was some inherent quality to religion that made it so influential in human life, while the work of Claude Levi-Strauss ushered in a new paradigm. He recognized that 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe created a context where 'scientific thought' was separated from religious thought<sup>4</sup> (Levi-Strauss 1995, 6). This distinction defined the way that the "old guard" defined religion, while not necessarily being applicable to non-European religions. This realization created new waves of thought within the anthropology of religion whose early champion was Talal Asad.

In *Genealogies of Religion*, Asad argued that because of the distinction between religious and scientific thought, anthropologists of religion had been treating the subject as a *sui generis* universal force and 'an archaic mode of scientific thinking' (Asad 1993, 27) that was a 'distinctive space of human practice and belief which cannot be reduced to any other' (Asad 1993, 27). In contrast, Asad argued for a study of religious *practice* rather than search for a

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<sup>4</sup> Levi-Strauss uses the term 'mythical.'

fictitious trans-historical religion (Asad 1993, 29, 36). Along with this criticism, Asad called on scholars to resist the urge to define religion, arguing that such definitions will invariably reflect the scholar's own cultural bias.<sup>5</sup> Academics, he argued, must resist enacting a form of cultural colonialism. Instead, Asad argued that religion is not a *sui generis* category, but one that is part of a power dynamic, a dynamic which can interfere with our understanding of religion and its place in human life (Asad 1993, 34-35). Asad, following the theories of Levi-Strauss, forced the anthropology of religion to look inward and become more reflexive.

Asad's work marks a turning point in the anthropology of religion. It caused scholars in the field to deconstruct the perspectives that had been formative in the discipline. This shift opened up the field to different ways of looking at religious phenomena, creating a space for the development of conceptualizations of lived religion that were firmly fixed on the practiced nature of religion with a minimized separation between the sacred and profane. However, the debate regarding the separation of sacred and profane has existed throughout the field's history. Both Van Gennep and Turner relied on the separation of the two for their respective conceptualizations of liminality (Van Gennep 1960, 11) and *communitas* (Turner 2008, 96), and argued that formative processes occurred during rituals where the sacred and profane were linked. However, in *Purity and Danger* (1984), Mary Douglas argued against the separation of the sacred from the profane. She criticized Durkheim for insisting on a 'complete break between the sphere of the sacred and the sphere of the profane, between secular and religious behaviour' (Douglas 1984, 21). She aligned herself with Margaret Mead in arguing that to separate practice from attitude was impossible (1928, 220). The subfield of lived religion within the anthropology of religion, as well as other social-scientific disciplines, emerged from this debate. The study of

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<sup>5</sup> This is reminiscent of Edward Said's discussion of Orientalism that saw the power and violence inherent in the separation of "the Orient" from "the Occident" (Said 1978, 13).

lived religion denies (or at least minimizes) the separation of the sacred and profane: taking a more holistic view of the individual where both can exist and be studied simultaneously.

Throughout its history, the anthropology of religion has focused on textual analysis, religious institutions, or the role of religious specialists, largely because they were accessible and were thought to be authoritative and comprehensive sources of religious data. Lived religion rejects this practice and uses qualitative data gained through fieldwork to find the ‘*social* realities of everyday religious life’ (Ammerman 2007, 6, emphasis in original). Lived or experiential religion approaches religious phenomena from the perspective of the individual and their everyday experiences rather than perspectives that give primacy to institutional practices (McGuire 2008, 5; Ammerman 2007, 5; Hall 1997, ix; Hervieu-Léger 1997, 24). Meredith McGuire’s work *Lived Religion* (2008) that investigates the religious lives of her subjects, along with the work being done by Robert Orsi, have uncovered a previously unimagined diversity and complexity in the religious lives of individuals. In *Lived Religion*, McGuire traces the way that definitions of the religious have been shaped by ‘contested meanings’ where disparate social power dynamics have been enacted through the process of defining what counted as real religion (McGuire 2008, 22). McGuire argues that by adopting these socially weighted definitions the sociology of religion has been engaged in what she calls the ‘Long Reformation’ (McGuire 2008, 22) where the uneven power dynamics present during the sixteenth century have been slowly solidified into sharp and official delineations between religions as well as between religious beliefs/activities and non-religious beliefs/activities. For McGuire, this framework developed in Western Europe during the Reformation at a time where it was socially and politically necessary to differentiate between religions, thus understanding them as mutually exclusive categories (McGuire 2008, 12). She argues that due to the use of these definitions

scholars of religion have been unable to conceptualize religious practices that existed outside of an institutional authoritative framework, leaving whole areas unstudied. Referencing her extensive collection of interviews amassed over her career, McGuire portrays the religious lives of individuals as being rich and varied while also finding them to be incompatible with standard definitions of religion. She adopts the term ‘lived religion’ to convey that this vital area of people’s lives shows everyday religious practice to be a colourful bricolage that draws from a vast array of influences while permeating every aspect of her subjects’ lives (McGuire 2008, 197). Within this subfield, personal experience is not solitary or purely individual, but instead understood as influenced and shaped by social and cultural interactions; what Robert Orsi called ‘networks of relationships’ (Orsi 2005, ix). By moving away from an approach that favours institutions or clearly delineated religious boundaries, lived religion utilizes a more dynamic view of religion by including multiple aspects of a person’s life. Its qualitative approach relies upon participants’ identification and understanding of their own religion, data that can then become a new, fresh vector of analysis.

The human and social construction of religion has permeated the discussion regarding the anthropology of religion. As a concluding note to this section, I present the theories of Jim Beckford, whose work informs much of the following thesis. The key feature, and perhaps only consistent through-line, of both early anthropology and the current study of the anthropology of religion is the idea that religion is socially constructed. That concept is refined in Jim Beckford’s book *Social Theory and Religion* (2008) where he explores the very nature, history, and possible future direction of the study of religion. Beckford breaks away from the phenomenologically oriented work of Thomas Luckmann and the more eclectic work of Peter Berger, arguing that these scholars ‘held religion to be constitutive of humanness and central to the allegedly

anthropological necessity for human beings to keep chaos at bay' (Beckford 2008, 199). Berger and Luckmann understood religion as being inherent to the human condition, but Beckford proposes a different course. In the twentieth century, the social sciences moved away from theories that focused on 'hypothetico-deductive' methods, and began to develop enterprises that 'came to rest less on models originating in physics and chemistry and more on interpretative strategies with roots in historiography, literacy criticism, linguistics, and humanistic psychology' (Beckford 2008, 30-31). This period in the development of the anthropology of religion promoted concepts such as a sensitivity to human values, meanings and intentions and shied away from the search for legalistic theoretical models that superseded social and historical contexts (Beckford 2008, 30-31). According to Beckford:

[t]he task of social and human sciences is not, therefore, to uncover a world of objective reality lurking behind the social constructions. Instead, the task is to understand how a sense of objective reality is socially constructed and changes—ideally including the self-reflexive process of doing social science itself (Beckford 2008, 71).

This perspective encourages a holistic enterprise where the researcher's own biases and views are examined in tandem with the complex and socially constructed religious phenomena that are observed.

The anthropology of religion has changed throughout its history, setting a course that both paralleled and shaped shifting conceptions of religion. Throughout this history, the anthropology of religion has moved away from the early theories of Marx and Freud, but perhaps not as far as one might expect. Each new variation or perspective built on those established previously: maintaining the theoretical foundation that humans create religion and that analysis of those creations provides insight into those same people.

## 6.2 *The Social-Scientific Study of Non-religion*

This section provides a summary of the development of the study of non-religion out of the social sciences. For good or ill, this interdisciplinary field was carried along in the same currents and eddies that carried the study of religion. The study of non-religion is the study of people who *identify themselves* as not having any religious affiliations, practices, or beliefs. An important distinction that characterizes this field is that it views individual and group expressions of non-religious identities as being derived, to varying degrees, from a complex relationship to the religions that these people encounter, both within their own culture and cross-culturally.

Non-religion and non-religious phenomena have existed throughout human history. However, the character of these phenomena and the ways that they were interpreted by scholars depended on a particular historical context (Febvre 1982, 5). The non-religion of Plato, expressed in his *Laws*, challenged the commonly held nature of the gods (Bellah 1971, 39). Major figures in philosophy and literature also wrote about the problems that they perceived with religion and the benefits of an atheistic understanding of the universe. Examples include such well-known figures as Thomas Paine, David Hume, Denis Diderot, Percy Bysshe Shelley, Ludwig Andreas Von Feuerbach and Friedrich Nietzsche. Though each of these figures could be considered non-religious, the ways that their non-religion manifested itself were unique to the time and place in which they lived. The early study of religion was also populated by people who were themselves non-religious, including Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Sigmund Freud. Their investigations into religious phenomena, however, did not transfer into a reflexive fascination with their own non-religious perspectives, though Freud and Marx certainly did not hesitate to promote religion's dissolution. For these scholars, their rejection of religion was tied to an evolutionary approach to the study of religion that foresaw the end of religious thinking as

a natural progression from “savage” understandings of the world to those of a “civilized” European. However, a small community of scholars adopted and adapted methods from the anthropology of religion to study non-religion.

The first academic studies into non-religion during the 1960s saw non-religious phenomena as being useful to understanding how *religious* identities and institutions were changing, with non-religion being of only secondary concern. Glenn Vernon posited that non-religious people (people who identified as “nones” on surveys when asked what religion they practiced or belonged to) were actually identifying with a new *religious* category (Vernon 1968, 219). This assertion led him to argue that non-religion acted mainly as a cypher through which the *religious* environment could be analyzed. Vernon’s main analytical focus was revealed in such questions as:

Does the existence and presence of “nones” in a society contribute to the ‘health’ of existing religions? To what extent does the existence of “nones” facilitate the accommodation of religious groups to society and society to the religious groups? Does the existence of “nones” encourage religious groups to attempt to relate their ‘eternal’ truths to the existing conditions in which their members are living and dying? (Vernon 1968, 229).

He concluded that “nones” contributed to societal integration by filling a functional role in pluralistic societies similar to those found in church groups (Vernon 1968, 229). Vernon’s contribution to the study of non-religion was perhaps more useful for the study of religion, but his work was one of the first in this growing field.

Scholars of both religion and non-religion in the 1960s were living in a time when authority was moving away from institutions and was becoming internalized in the individual (Bellah 1971, 47; Cimino and Smith 2007, 414). Also, people were rejecting what were termed ‘conventional forms of belief’ and had ‘replaced them with a personal quest for meaning’

(Corporale 1971, 7-8). At this time, it was theorized that neither religion nor non-religion should be seen as universal features of human experience, but instead as subjective phenomena that developed as part of a specific historical context (Luckmann 1971, 22). This was a theoretical perspective that allowed scholars to study non-religion as a valid part of a newfound path to meaning, even if that meaning was not derived through religion. Religious belief, belonging, and practice were no longer seen as having a monopoly on the way people construct meaning. Charles Glock, addressing this shift in research focus, proposed an approach that utilized qualitative analysis in combination with quantitative methods involving longitudinal surveys (Glock 1971, 66).<sup>6</sup> At this time, the field was becoming more open to approaches that emphasized the study of non-religion with less emphasis on how that analysis affected or illuminated the study of religion.

There was a growing need to conceptualize new tools and perspectives that could help scholars to understand non-religion. Colin Campbell, in an early foray into developing these tools during the late 1960s and early 1970s, argued that the study of non-religion should not be the analysis of religion ‘stood on its head’ (Campbell 1971, 13). Campbell, using the term “irreligion,” proposed that the study of non-religion ‘could best be achieved by allowing the discussion of the material to generate its own perspectives, rather than by employing particular developed sociological viewpoints’ (Campbell 1971, viii). For Campbell it was clear that religious and non-religious phenomena could be the products of the same social forces (Campbell 1971, 15), and he concluded that non-religious phenomena are formed in response to the religions that were found in the surrounding culture (Campbell 1971, 21). Following from

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<sup>6</sup> For more studies that adopt this mixed methodology see Black 1983; Cimino and Smith 2010; Demerath and Thiessen 1966; Gervais et al. 2011; Hadaway and Roof 1979; Hunsberger et al. 2001; Quack 2012; Ysseldyk et al. 2011; and Zuckerman 2008 and 2012.

this, the various American examples of non-religion would be different from British examples, and each of them would be different from those found in Italy, and so on. Here we see the importance of viewing non-religion as a relational and contextually specific phenomenon, rather than simply being a universally applied term to indicate individuals or groups who hold a nihilistic or antagonistic view towards religions (Campbell 1971, 28). Campbell advocated for an open and inquisitive social-scientific approach that provided new ways to understand the nuances of non-religious phenomena within the lives of individuals. An individual focus laid the groundwork for the introduction of psychological methods into the study of non-religion.

The study of non-religion is currently experiencing a sort of renaissance, but Campbell's call to develop a sociology of irreligion went largely unanswered until the 1990s. This was partly due to the study of non-religion being overshadowed by a debate concerning the general trend towards secularization. Much of this debate centered around theories positing that people were becoming less religious overall. Secularization theory can be thought of as the notion that 'modernity brings about a decline of religion' (Berger et al. 2008, 10) and, in this context, the debate itself diverted academic attention away from individual personal experience that could investigate the nuances of people's lives who may or may not be growing less religious, while also focusing on a very institutionalized view of religion.<sup>7</sup> It was only when the secularization debate lost momentum that scholars showed a renewed interest into non-religion over secularization and people over institutions. Recent studies into non-religion, particularly those carried out in the late twentieth into the twenty-first centuries, have begun to revitalize discussions regarding non-religious people. These new approaches view non-religious people as developing and expressing a non-religious identity within their particular cultural and societal

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<sup>7</sup> For examples of discussions of secularization and the surrounding debate see Bruce 2002; Dobbelaere 1981; Smith 2003b; Swatos and Christiano 2000; Asad 2003.

contexts, contexts that may or may not be religious, rather than as cyphers through which we can gauge the religiousness of the world.

Psychological approaches, utilizing many of Campbell's methods, that developed in the 1990s provided insights into the ways that non-religious people transitioned away from or never developed an affinity to religion. The psychological approach led Thomas Davenport to argue, basing his argument on an extensive study of national surveys, that non-religious people in the San Francisco area were not existentially troubled due to their perceived "lack" of religious identification or belief and they did not feel that they were leading meaningless lives without the influence of religious belonging or belief (Davenport 1991, 139). This was important to the study of non-religion because it established that non-religion was not inherently deviant or personally disruptive. Bob Altemeyer and Bruce Hunsberger (1997; see also Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006), also using a psychological approach, investigated how a person's childhood affected the nature of their religious or non-religious identification. By studying the life history of non-religious people, they found that non-religious individuals who were raised to be religious also happened to be raised in homes that emphasized the pursuit of "the truth." These children were encouraged to think about their worlds and were rewarded when they found what they and their parents considered to be the truth. When it came to determining their religious beliefs or affiliation, these same individuals questioned the veracity of religious claims, finding the traditionally provided answers unsatisfactory. This led them to reject religion because they had been encouraged in the past for finding the "right" answer (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 212).

The first decades of the twenty-first century would see a huge increase in the number of studies regarding non-religion. The recent revitalization of the study of non-religion is due, in

part, to the emergence of increasingly vocal and visible non-religious communities around the world. The tragic events of September 11, 2001, an act that many Americans understood to be religiously motivated,<sup>8</sup> encouraged several books to be published extolling what the authors thought to be the problems of religion (Amarasingam 2010, 574; Bainbridge 2010; Borer 2010; Bullivant<sup>9</sup> 2010; and Stahl 2010). These books included Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2006), Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006), Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004), and Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (2007). The publication and subsequent success of these books meant that non-religion, particularly the flavour espoused by these authors, became popularized. This emerging popularity made non-religion visible to the public consciousness in a way that the academic community studying non-religion did not expect. Though these atheist authors are academics and were undoubtedly non-religious, they were neither scholars of religion or non-religion. Therefore, scholars should be cautioned not to take the particular expression of non-religion that these books espouse to be indicative of non-religion in general. Regardless of whether or not these books were representative of non-religion in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, these works brought non-religion into the public consciousness and encouraged non-religious people to "come out," as it were, and become visible in their respective cultures. At the very least these books encouraged discussions about what it meant to be religious or non-religious in modern societies (Cimino and Smith 2010, 139) and provided the study of non-religion with a wealth of newly visible individuals and groups as subjects of inquiry.

During this boom in studies of non-religion, a new development emerged that looked at non-religion as a form of social movement. Scholars found that non-religious people in the United States were not simply calling for an end to religion, nor were they categorically adopting

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<sup>8</sup> Though religious motivations undoubtedly played a role in the commission of this act, this interpretation completely discounts a wealth of other explanations including economic or political factors.

<sup>9</sup> This reference and all references to (Bullivant) are to Stephen Bullivant rather than the author of this thesis.

a negative stance towards religion. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, conducting qualitative interviews, surveys, and engaging in content analysis of non-religious magazines, found that non-religious people in the U.S. were becoming mobilized through a new dialogue with each other and with their religious counterparts (Cimino and Smith 2010, 140). Through an analysis of this dialogue Cimino and Smith found that a rising ‘atheist consciousness’ was due to non-religious people’s growing awareness that their views did not match those of the ‘majority,’ causing them to see themselves as embattled minorities (Cimino and Smith 2007, 151, 413). This status was based on the perceived or actual dominance of religious belief in the United States; a prime example of how looking at non-religion through a relational lens provides insight into the nature of a particular non-religious phenomenon and the culture that surrounds it.

Investigations into the national and cultural character of non-religion are useful, but there is also a need for an international cross-cultural perspective. Phil Zuckerman performed qualitative ethnographic studies comparing non-religious individuals in the United States and Scandinavia, producing his most influential work, *Society Without God* (2008), where he provided an example of the analysis possible with an extensive and comparative anthropological study of non-religion in the United States and Scandinavian countries. He argued that non-religion takes on a specific and often very public character in the United States because it is creating a non-religious identity in contrast to a deeply seated, visible, and ubiquitous Christianity (Zuckerman 2008, 8). In contrast, examples from Scandinavian countries displayed a very different non-religious character. In these cases Zuckerman reported an indifference to religious belief in the general populace, which was largely relegated to the private sphere, creating an expression of non-religion in Scandinavia that was relatively muted (Zuckerman 2008, 98-109). A cross-cultural approach exposed the different ways that people can be non-

religious, particularly how the character of their non-religion was dependent on the culture within which they lived (Zuckerman 2008, 4-5).

The winding road travelled by those engaged in the study of non-religion led them first to focus on non-religion as a tool to understand religious phenomena. This was largely due to the field's roots in the study of religion. Eventually, the field transitioned away from its focus on religion into a multi- and inter-disciplinary field with a concentration on non-religious phenomena (Bullivant and Lee 2012, 19). The term "non-religion" is relatively new and replaces the more commonly used terms of atheist, atheism, or irreligion, terms that denote 'a lack of belief in a God or gods' (Bullivant 2008, 363). Though atheists are included within the category of non-religion, based on Lee's definition of non-religion found above, a study of atheism is a study about how people feel towards a divine figure or figures, but a study of *non-religion* is a study about how people relate to religious phenomena including, but not limited to, religious people, institutions, groups, actions, or ideas. Throughout much of the history of the anthropology of religion (and other social-scientific disciplines), there has been a distinct lack of scholarship into non-religion. Investigations into the phenomenon, however, have increased as non-religious people emerge more fully into public life and begin to openly express the various ways of being and acting non-religious.

Lois Lee's work has been at the forefront of creating the current definition of non-religion: further refining and systematizing the study of non-religion as a phenomenon that is primarily defined by its relation to the surrounding religious expressions and culture. Lee argued that the study of non-religion has struggled to define its subject, and this has led to fragmentation of the field (Lee 2012, 130). Proposing a remedy to this situation, Lee's approach standardizes the language used when discussing both non-religious phenomena and non-religious people.

Instead of continuing to use terms like “secular,” “secularist,” or “atheist” as if they were interchangeable, she proposed a relational definition of the term “non-religion” (Lee 2012, 135-136). Lee’s definition of non-religion focuses on the relational aspect of non-religion to the religion that it encounters, providing a framework for investigation, but also allowing those studying non-religious phenomena to let non-religious people and organizations define themselves.

The study of non-religion is now over 40 years old, but its theoretical and methodological tools are just reaching maturity. Despite Lee’s call for a unified terminology, the words used to refer to individuals and groups who are not religious remains confusing both within the field and to the general public. The term itself is arguably flawed because it requires some reference to religion that, if not handled carefully, can become a tacit admission that religious belief is normative (which, depending on the culture, it may be). The study of non-religion began as a way to understand religion, but as more and more scholars became interested in the subject the field has transitioned into a distinct area of study that involves religion but is not primarily about religion. It has purged its tendencies to see non-religion, or religion, as a *universal* human experience while also developing tools for understanding cultures both individually and cross-culturally. The field may never transcend its definitional woes, and it may never expand out of its inherent link to religion or to the study of religion, but through the gathering and analysis of nuanced anthropological data the phenomena that it represents will continue to be revealed.

Research on lived religion is useful to the study of non-religion because it focuses on the interaction between ideas that may constitute a certain distinct set of beliefs along with the various, and sometimes contradictory, ways in which those beliefs are put into practice. Susan

Budd, a scholar of humanist organizations in Britain, states it well when she says that this perspective consists of

the study of how ideas are adopted, simplified, made usable and incorporated into social activity not by those great men who create them or make them their own, but by ordinary men and women whose lives are changed by what they may not fully understand, who form the membership of those movements and currents of opinion which themselves play a part in history. They are the link between ideas and social context, between figure and ground, the medium through which thought and material life must pass to meet. They are the reality behind those handy conceptual ragbags, the 'spirit of the times' and the 'general social context', in which ultimately all chains of causes are lost or abandoned (Budd 1977, 1).

This focus exposes the deep and elegantly tangled interpenetration within a person's life of what are often thought to be discrete beliefs and ideas. The way non-religion is lived, following the model set out by lived religion, becomes less about standard or technical definitions about a set of ideas and more about how people enact those ideas in their lives. Orsi makes the goals of studying lived religion clear when he says that

[t]he key questions concern what people do with religious idioms, how they use them, what they make of themselves and their worlds with them, and how, in turn, men, women, and children are fundamentally shaped by the worlds they are making as they make these worlds (Orsi 2003).

For my purposes, it is not imperative that the idioms be religious, only that they be used in shaping an individual's world. So the perspective of lived religion can be just as effectively applied to any aspect of people's lives where ideas are put into practice. By applying McGuire and Orsi's framework to non-religion many of the issues regarding the somewhat cumbersome debates over whether atheism or non-religion in general is or is not a religion can be set aside. Within this perspective both religion and non-religion become sets of ideas that are valuable to the individual and to the researcher only in as much as they are used to engage with and create

that person's world. This ongoing debate about the religious leanings of non-religious ways of being, combined with the lack of any research done on understanding how non-religion is lived means that we literally do not know how non-religious Americans navigate their lives. At best, focusing on works like *The God Delusion* only tells us how Richard Dawkins forms his own identity and practice and almost nothing about how other non-religious people do the same.

Synthesizing these two approaches means that it is possible to avoid a potential problem that is created when we discard the rigid separation between the sacred and profane. The study of non-religion tempers this approach and removes the temptation to find the sacred everywhere, or conversely, finding the secular permeating the sacred; a struggle evident in Vernon's categorization of non-religion as a new religious category. This dovetails with both Lee's and Campbell's approaches that ask that non-religion be viewed as a relational phenomenon to religion. By merging the anthropology of religion with the study of non-religion, this approach makes it possible to play with the socially constructed boundaries between the religious and non-religious to see where and how they interact or overlap in the individual in an effort to understand what is actually going on in non-religious communities (Beckford 2003, 196).

Another reason that these two disciplines can be productively synthesized is that the approaches found in the Anthropology of Religion and the study of non-religion are complementary. The Anthropology of Religion sees religions as being human created phenomena while the study of non-religion views phenomena like atheism, agnosticism, etc. as creations of individuals and groups in relation to their conceptualizations of religions. By creating an analytical framework where I investigate 'lived non-religion,' I can distance myself from standard definitions that have reinforced or even created the love/hate understanding of the non-religion/religion relationship, allowing those who call themselves non-religious to define it

for themselves as they put it into practice, while also being able to recognize internal nuances in how people express their non-religion.

## **7. Thesis Structure**

During my participant observation at Camp Quest Montana several issues emerged. These included the development of a discourse of beliefs that were described by the campers as having spiritual elements as well as a strong tendency towards a minority discourse with regards to religion being given a tacit preferential treatment in the United States. Also, I observed that the adults had a markedly different experience of growing up non-religious in the United States than that experienced by their children. These observations are broken up into chapters and discussed in order to analyse the Camp Questers' experiences and expressions.

Chapter Two details the social, cultural, and historic forces that have developed in the United States which have led the Camp Questers to start developing expressions that include the language of belief. The history of the United States is intimately linked with religious identification and belief. During its time as a British colony, the area that now makes up part of the United States attracted religious Europeans whose own religious expressions faced increasing persecution in Europe. In the New World these settlers found a place where they could be free to practice their religion in any way they saw fit. The Deist influences on the Founding Fathers of the United States limited the official influence that religion or the state could exert upon each other, but this did not create a country free of religion. Instead, the United States has developed into a country where Protestant Christianity flourishes primarily along with limited religious diversity. This situation has resulted in almost any form of Christianity being given the same weight in social discourse, notable exceptions being Catholicism until relatively recently and an

ongoing stigma in the United States against radical Islam. There have been numerous quantitative studies that found the bulk of people living in the United States self-identified as belonging to some form of religious group, with the majority considering themselves to be Christian (Pew Research Institute 2008, 10). Whether or not the United States is actually filled with vocal and aggressive Christians, however, is not relevant to this discussion. The primary focus of this research is to point out, investigate, and analyse the fact that that the people at Camp Quest Montana *feel* that it is, experience the world *as if* this was true, and *behave* according to those feelings and perceived realities.

The religious culture of the United States presents the non-religious people at Camp Quest with an unenviable position where they are viewed by most Americans as lacking in the basic foundations of morality, and are thus less trusted than religious Americans. This causes an implicit pressure to be religious in order to gain acceptance that goes along with an assumption in the minds of Americans that everyone has some form of religious identification and belief. I argue in Chapter Two that the use of a language of beliefs is a direct result of these developments and is an implicit strategy employed by the Camp Questers to gain acceptance within American society and lessen the stigma against non-religious Americans.

Chapter Three discusses the *content* of the beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana. These beliefs are informed by a self-defined spirituality derived from a scientific understanding of the universe. The beliefs that result from this spirituality are: there is a connection between every atom in existence based on the chemical origin of all matter, the belief that this connection has moral implications that encourage compassion, tolerance and acceptance of all people, which extends to a deep respect for the environment, and finally, the belief that this life is of the utmost importance because the existence of an afterlife cannot be proven. In order to fully understand

the content of beliefs found at Camp Quest, Chapter Three provides a brief discussion of how the term belief has been used in academic literature. While acknowledging the Christian origins of the term, the explicit expression of beliefs by the Camp Questers and the importance of these spiritual beliefs to their sense of self provide useful areas of analysis concerning how the Camp Questers break down and create boundaries between themselves and other Americans.

Each of the abovementioned chapters informs the discussion presented in Chapter Four. It is the last main chapter and it describes the different ways that the adults and teenagers at Camp Quest are engaging with religious Americans, and theorizes why these differences exist. The parents were not particularly expressive of their non-religion and, if left to their own devices, would be content to remain closeted. The issues that caused them to outwardly express their non-religion were when they viewed their right to be non-religious being infringed by the encroachment of religious beliefs. The teenagers, on the other hand, were much more engaged with other Americans and were more open about expressing their non-religion. I argue that these differences result from the parents having to leave the religion of their parents, which caused stresses between themselves and their primary support group. Having lived through this traumatic experience that still affects them today, the parents at Camp Quest Montana sought to provide a supportive atmosphere in which their children could decide for themselves whether or how they wanted to be non-religious.

This strategy has affected the teenagers by making them much more likely to talk about their non-religion with others and the interactions where tensions arise are different because of this. For the teenagers, they feel the most tension with religious Americans when they perceive their religious peers to be demonstrating intolerance towards others based on religious motivations. The fact that intolerance is the site of these interactions is part of the teenage Camp

Questers showing that they have assimilated an identity that mirrors that found in numerous academic studies which indicate that American youth identity focuses on tolerance and acceptance of others. I argue that the young Camp Questers are enacting an American identity that developed out of their ability to express spiritual beliefs, gained through supportive parenting, in order to challenge the intolerance of particular religious expressions and thus enforce that American identity.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **A RELIGIOUS AMERICA AND THE LANGUAGE OF BELIEF**

This chapter discusses the tacit and overt pressures that the unique history of the United States has created for non-religious Americans. This history is one where religion and religious identification, particularly Christian versions of each, have become the norm, which has created an assumption in Americans that non-religious people are somehow less acceptable in America and less worthy of their trust (Beaman 2013, 141). The following provides a brief overview of the role and influence that religion has had in the history of the United States and its people. Religious sentiment has been strong in the United States since colonization by Europeans. This tendency of Americans to identify with some form of religion has continued in modern times so much so that the United States has developed a culture of religion, where religious sentiment and expression permeates American life.

The results of Americans' intimate relationship to religion have presented unique challenges to non-religious people in that country who seek recognition of their membership in American culture and society. This is made clear through a presentation of the academic literature that reports the consequences of America's culture of religion for the lives of non-religious Americans, augmented by real life accounts from the Camp Questers. Based on that data, I argue that the use of belief language by the campers is an attempt to gain acceptance in a country where all aspects of society are influenced in some way by religion. A key feature of the deployment of belief language is the concomitant choice to self-identify as Freethinkers rather than atheists, because atheists are perceived to believe in nothing.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> This trend was also found by Cimino and Smith 2007, 414.

During a group discussion at Camp Quest, Abby's husband Jed talked about the importance of Camp Quest in providing the children, and perhaps the adults, with a venue to learn positive ways to express themselves. For the Camp Questers, these expressions centered around a language of belief. Jed was a middle-aged, burly, talkative and likeable doctor who chose to live in Montana and work at a relatively small hospital at a much-reduced pay grade because he preferred the rural lifestyle that such a position could provide his family. Much of his time at Camp Quest was spent driving the motorboat around Flathead Lake while towing each of us on various watersports equipment. He was eloquent in his love of science and his feelings of wonder at the sheer magnitude of the known universe. He was particularly captivated by science's ability to help us understand that universe. By helping Abby create Camp Quest Montana, Jed hoped to

foster an environment where we do believe. I think that what happens to these kids a lot and even to us as adults is that we're...we have an easier time vocalizing what we don't believe in than we do verbalizing what we do believe in, and what I want to see our kids begin to experience is that not only do they have a lot to believe in, but they have a lot to believe in that probably offers a more beautiful and more comprehensive and a more thorough approach to our day-to-day experience and the world and the universe than any conventional faith. So I don't want them to be left with 'I don't believe in that.' They may be atheists in regards to the god of Abraham, but they're also...they don't believe in the tooth fairy or you know little green men under the grass either. In some ways when we focus so much on what we don't believe in we are validating this concept that, relatively, is a recent concept in the emergence of life on earth that we have this amazing world and it must be due to some man in the sky, when in reality, in parallel with that thinking over the past few thousands of years we've made tremendous strides in understanding the history of our world and universe.

Jed said that, as a result of his children's time at Camp Quest he hoped that he could get them to shift their self-expression to one that focused on

those things that we do know, that explain our existence, that offer a beauty of day-to-day experience so that they can feel empowered with what they believe.

They have a belief set too and their belief set is as valid, if not more valid, than those that they encounter in their day-to-day lives.

These sentiments were echoed by the rest of the campers and are phenomena that have yet to be discussed in the academic literature on non-religion. The question arises as to why the campers at Camp Quest Montana have begun talking about beliefs when belief has traditionally been the domain of religious discourse. From the perspective that views non-religion as a relational phenomenon to the religion in a given culture, I argue that the particular socio-religious historical context of the United States has created a situation where religious belief, and indeed religious language have become the *lingua franca* of the majority of Americans and a significant indicator of American identity. This has caused the Camp Questers to describe themselves using belief language in order to better identify and communicate with religious Americans because belief language mitigates the forces of exclusion felt by the Camp Questers as well as some of the causes of those same forces.

Central to this discussion is the importance of religion and how its role in the history of the United States has created a social, but nevertheless real, barrier for those who are not religious. This barrier has created a reaction where non-religious Americans try to negotiate the limits of their exclusion in an attempt to claim membership within its boundary. I should note here that I am not saying that an expression of belief is an intentional shift in discourse or a deliberate plan concocted by the Camp Questers. Instead, I would like to suggest that, at least for these particular individuals, expressing non-religious beliefs is an involuntary response to the environment in which they live. The people at Camp Quest Montana have begun to adopt a language of belief as an avenue to express their views in a country permeated by religious discourse, a country where the expression of non-religion has limited or questionable legitimacy.

This chapter provides a selective summary of how religion has entered into the group consciousness of American society through a focused presentation of the history of the United States, with special focus on the role and influence of religion. That discussion is followed by a description from the academic literature detailing how the influence of religion has shaped contemporary views about non-religious Americans. Using ethnographic accounts from the campers, I then show how the cultural influence of religion in the United States has created real-world problems for the non-religious people at Camp Quest. The actual content of the beliefs developed and expressed at Camp Quest Montana is discussed in the next chapter.

America's unique history has created a system where religious identification now implies membership within the dominant culture (Hadaway and Roof 1979, 195; Beaman 2013, 141). In recent decades, Christian Americans, who make up the majority of the population, have grown more accepting of alternative ways to be American, particularly in the case of the variety of ways for Americans to be religious, but the acceptance of non-religious Americans has stagnated in relation to gains for the vast diversity found in American religious groups. The ubiquity of religious belief has created an environment where there is a tacit assumption that to be American means that you have some form of religious belief. Also, while the U.S. is currently a pluralistic, multi-cultural society, surveys have found that despite the appearance of pluralism, more often than not, a person will self-identify as belonging to a religion or a religious group and that group will most likely fall into a Christian, particularly Protestant, category (Beaman 2003, 311). That is the atmosphere that the non-religious people at Camp Quest, as well as other non-religious groups and individuals, navigate every day in the United States. This environment has had a long development from before the formation of the country, a foundation that sowed the seeds of distrust between religious Americans and their non-religious neighbours (Jacoby 2004, 39).

## **1. The Founding of America: the Creation of a Religious Culture**

The colonization of what would become the United States was not homogenous. Most of these early Americans identified as some form of Protestant, but European immigrants arrived in multiple waves from various countries for various reasons. Most of these colonists sought to escape the religious persecution that was prevalent in Europe at that time, while others, coming from countries where their religion was officially linked to government, were comforted by the formal establishment of churches in some states (Brown 2002, 17). These diverse Christian groups were energized and united through the Great Awakening, a spontaneously generated religious revival that occurred roughly between 1730 and 1743 that emphasized the personal religious experience over ecclesiastical orthodoxy and also increased the nation's religious enthusiasm (Lambert 2008, 19; Fuller 2001, 23; Ahlstrom 2004, 286). In a somewhat counter-intuitive turn, this Awakening set the stage for the disestablishment of religion that would come after the American Revolution. The focus of the Great Awakening on personal or experiential religious expressions meant that all were welcome as long as they had some form of deep religious experience. This sentiment meant that, prior to breaking away from Britain, the citizens of this new country had already become accustomed to free expression of their beliefs and were—for the most part—willing to extend that right to those that disagreed with them (Lambert 2008, 19). This was not as revolutionary a concept as it first appears because the majority of colonists were Protestant and so, despite numerous differences and schisms, there was a high degree of overlap and similarity among their beliefs (Lambert 2008, 19). Despite the seemingly accepting and diverse religious atmosphere in Colonial America, these same seventeenth and eighteenth century Puritans actively persecuted the Protestant Quakers as well as Jesuit

Catholics, with anti-Catholic sentiments remaining prevalent at least into the eighteenth, nineteenth, and even twentieth centuries (Berger et al. 2008, 28).

The breaking away of the thirteen British colonies from their English masters in the latter half of the eighteenth century created an American national narrative that reflected and reinforced a shared sense of religious sentiment while also emphasizing a rejection of tradition. This narrative was a product of its time, with the breaking away of the colonies occurring at the ‘height of the discussion about political freedom in its modern sense’ (Berger et al. 2008, 52), and was influenced by the ideals of the French Revolution. The first of these narratives reflected the ‘seventeenth-century Puritan escape to religious freedom from persecution in England’ and the second was the rejection of political despotism, which at this time wore an English crown (Asad 2003, location 2267). The sentiment of early Americans and the religious landscape that this sentiment created can be ‘best understood as a reaction to the European case—a reaction powerful enough to drive people across the ocean as they sought escape from religious persecution in Europe’ (Berger et al. 2008, 28). Contrasting itself against the Europe that many new Americans had fled, the new country began creating its own narrative, one that involved religion and one where

the founding ideology of the republic, forged in Revolution, proclaimed liberty to depend on a virtuous people; American purity, measured against European luxury and moral declension, confirmed that God had favored the patriots’ undertakings (Turner 1985, 83).

Instead of creating a secular nation along the lines of the Revolution in France, the American Revolution created a country that valued the ‘freedom to believe’ as opposed to a ‘freedom from belief’ (Berger et al. 2008, 28), opening the doors to religious diversification.

The creation of the United States as an independent country was more than just the rejection of the way things had always been. The founders of America also established a government that

respected, and in many ways mirrored, the balance between Enlightenment rationalism and religion in the larger society. Americans lived no longer in an age of faith but in an age of *faiths* and an age of reason (Jacoby 2004, 40, my emphasis).

This age of reason was instilled with principles from the Enlightenment that depicted ‘a universe that [was] intelligible, harmonious, and thoroughly rational’ and ‘sought the lawful principles underlying every facet of existence’ (Fuller 2001, 18). The age of faiths and the age of reason were linked by the personal beliefs of many of the Founders of the United States. Two important factors in the formation of the United States were the deism of many of the founding fathers and the rise of the Unitarian Church. Deism, particularly that of Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, James Madison and Benjamin Franklin (Corbett and Corbett 1999, 58), reduced much of the substance of religion to morality, with Jefferson famously distilling ‘Jesus’ teachings into nothing more than a set of moral maxims’ viewing everything that remained as ‘priestcraft and superstition’ (Turner 1985, 66). For Deists, God had imparted a rational design to the world, but did not miraculously intervene or send special revelations (Fuller 2001, 19). The Deism of the founders dovetailed with the growing popularity of the Unitarian Church that developed out of the Congregational churches of the eighteenth century. This new Church reflected the deist practices of rejecting predestination, the doctrine of the Holy Trinity, and the condemnation of people to Hell (Jacoby 2004, 53; Cimino and Smith 2007, 73) and created fertile soil for the Founders’ brand of religion-turned-moralism. In 1933 the Unitarians, almost two-hundred years after they had influenced the creation of a new nation, issued a Humanist Manifesto that

described a moral system that was not founded on religious guidelines (Humanist Manifesto 1), though this document included reference to religion until its revision in 1973 (Cimino and Smith 2007, 408). In short, Deism was central to the worldview of many of the Founding Fathers, but it never gained popular support and therefore its day in the sun in the United States was to end shortly after the founding of this new nation. By the 1790s and early nineteenth century the Evangelical Christian spirit had gained such widespread support that

[d]evastation fell upon reasonable religion. So successful proved the assault that by the 1830s the last crippled Deists had been driven into that outer darkness where dwelt only disreputable radicals. A new and very different tone inspired American religion (Turner 1985, 73).

Despite the increasing influence of Christianity over Deist principles, the legacy of Deism and the Unitarians in the creation of the United States remains in the form of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The Amendment was added in 1791, within two years of the Constitution's ratification, along with eight other amendments collectively known as the Bill of Rights (Swatos 2010, 421; Brown 2002, 18). This amendment created the formal separation of church and state at the Federal level by entrenching in U.S. law that 'Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion,' and also that Congress shall make no law 'prohibiting the free exercise of religion' which are known as the "establishment" and "free exercise" clauses respectively (Swatos 2010, 421). Ironically, this amendment was intended to limit religion's influence on the state and vice versa. Instead, it set the stage for an immense swelling of religious sentiment in America during the nineteenth century and beyond.

## **2. Nineteenth Century America: Spirituality and Protestantism**

Despite the formation of the United States under Deist and Revolutionary principles, the overwhelming influence of Protestantism after the American Revolution cannot be understated.

The fact that there could be no nationally established churches due to the First Amendment meant that American churches were becoming voluntary denominations (Marty 1961, 73; Berger et al. 2008, 16). Some states, Massachusetts for example, still maintained established churches, but this ended in 1833 and by this time ‘Episcopalianism in the South and Congregationalism-Presbyterianism in New England had been transformed into competing denominations’ (Marty 1961, 73). Rather than separating Americans because of their diverse religious memberships, the Second Great Awakening that emerged manifested an ecumenical spirit that ‘ignored denominational distinctions and theological disputes in an effort to organize Protestants of all sects to work for the moral reform of society’ (Lambert 2008, 55-56). The Second Great Awakening’s ecumenical push in the late 1700s and early 1800s (Fuller 2001, 23; Ahlstrom 2004, 387) meant that by its end, ‘Protestantism had so molded the outlook, morals, mores, customs, and standards of the nation that church and world were almost indistinguishable’ (Marty 1961, 139).

Protestantism has been dominant in the United States since before its founding, but Roman Catholics have also lived alongside Protestant Americans. Until the first half of the nineteenth century, Roman Catholics had lived in the United States as a persecuted and numerically insignificant group. With increased immigration in the 1800s, however, Roman Catholics in America became the largest church in the country (Ahlstrom 2004, 555), and this influx of Catholic immigrants shattered the illusion of Protestant unity and dominance (Lambert 2008, 65). Many of these new Catholics came from Ireland, but a large number of Catholics also came from France and Spain, whose imperial ventures challenged the attitudes that saw the United States as having a ‘special responsibility to realize its destiny as a Protestant nation’ (Ahlstrom 2004, 559). Protestants in the United States would continue to be aggravated by the

Catholics in their midst even well into the twentieth century when Americans elected John F. Kennedy as the first and only Roman Catholic President.

Though Protestantism's dominance in the United States was challenged during this century by increases in Roman Catholic immigration, Protestantism was also on the rise. The ranks of both main forms of Christianity swelled, but at this time a new experience was permeating the American consciousness. The writings and ideas of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg in the 1830s (Fuller 2001, 26) and the American Transcendentalist Ralph Waldo Emerson were giving Americans new ways to describe their 'inner-relationship to unseen spiritual dimensions of life' (Fuller 2001, 13). Swedenborg's ideas were so popular because he was able to articulate ways for Americans to reconcile their 'scientific and spiritual yearnings' (Fuller 2001, 24). Transcendentalism, promoted by Ralph Waldo Emerson, was founded by a group of Unitarian preachers and maintained the Unitarian principles of 'freedom in religious thinking, the humanity of Jesus, and the culturally conditioned nature of the Bible' (Fuller 2001, 27).

One of the most influential people in the popularization of spirituality in the United States was Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891) who immigrated to New York in 1872 (Fuller 2001, 52). In 1875 Blavatsky merged Hindu and Buddhist thought in an attempt to bridge the perceived 'gulf between science and religion through the study of mesmerism, spiritualism, and the universal ether' (Fuller 2001, 52) and her 1877 book *Isis Unveiled* was recognized as an instant classic (Fuller 2001, 52). Two authors who also drove an increase in spirituality were William James and James Redfield. William James, the author of *The Varieties of Religious Experience* 'most clearly put the imprimatur of highbrow respectability on Americans' fascination with unconventional spirituality' (Fuller 2001, 55). Also, James Redfield, the author of *The Celestine*

*Prophecy*, was promoting experiences that, in many ways, made him ‘a prototype of the “seeker” style of Baby Boomer spirituality’ that would develop in the twentieth century (Fuller 2001, 70).

The rise in spirituality in the United States along with other forms of religious experimentation was halted because of the chaos of the American Civil War. During this conflict, rampant political discord and carnage ‘siphoned away much of the enthusiasm for religious innovation’ (Fuller 2001, 45). However, when Americans could achieve some form of normalcy after the end of this terrible conflict, they

had generally bought into the idea that people could govern their civil lives apart from supernatural considerations, and yet continue to practice religion publicly according to the dictates of their conscience or emotions or both (Swatos 2010, 422).

This sense of toleration, at least in public had, however, certain limits. Competing religious denominations became concerned with the rise of radical free-thought or secularism. This concern informed the responses of Americans to anti- or non-religious expression in the nineteenth century. Some examples were the Comstock Laws and the Haymarket Case. The Comstock Laws outlawed incidents of ‘obscenity’ a term that also included incidents of blasphemy (Jacoby 2004, 194). The Haymarket Case of 1887 involved the prosecution and subsequent hanging of the defendants involved in a union riot, and was the first “Red Scare” incident in the country (Jacoby 2004, 172). The fear of socialist and communist influence would affect the next hundred years of America’s view toward non-religion. This time period was popularly framed as one where a godly America was standing against the godless communist forces of Marxist-Leninism, a sentiment that only increased during the Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union (Bullivant 2010, 113; Swatos 2010, 437; Jacoby 2004, 214, 229; Roof 1999, 139).

Though the narrative of the twentieth century was one of competing ideologies, the United States, through immigration, was becoming a more pluralistic society that was increasingly urban, multi-lingual, and containing people from diverse cultures (Jacoby 2004, 201). In such a diverse society belief systems were exposed to each other and interacted (Marty 1966, 100-101) and these new Americans were expected to adapt their nationality, language, and even culture, to American norms, but they were not expected to change their religion (Herberg 1960, 23). This interaction was also happening at a time when the sciences were gaining in prestige, biblical scholarship was investigating the history of Christian and Jewish texts, and there was a growing awareness of cultural relativism, which made it increasingly difficult for educated Americans to hold unswerving loyalty to a traditional religious institution (Fuller 2001, 5). These trends and attitudes would colour the tensions that developed between religious and non-religious Americans during the twentieth century.

### **3. Twentieth and Early Twenty-first Century America**

At the same time that America was being positioned as the Godly counterpoint to Soviet Atheism, there was an internal dialogue going on about the *nature* of American godliness. The Scopes trial in 1925 that tried a teacher (Scopes) for teaching evolution in his school was a pyrrhic victory for biblical literalists (Brown 2002, 21, 228). This trial was widely publicized and the scientific arguments for evolution were given an open hearing alongside arguments for a biblical account of creation. Popular support for the teaching of evolution, even though Scopes was found guilty, became a sign for American evangelicals that America at large did not agree with their view of the world, causing them to separate themselves from political and social engagement (Brown 2002, 21) and focus on evangelistic enterprises such as missions and

revivals (Lambert 2008, 188). This did not mean that religion had no place in the United States, only that the more public expression of religion, particularly evangelical approaches, went out of fashion in favour of religious expression that was more moderate and private. This moderate and socially acceptable form of Christianity became the norm and led to the creation of a widespread, but vague, religious sensibility that was public, but could never be official or standardized due to the restrictions put in place by the First Amendment.

The public perception of America during the Cold War as the religious protagonist fighting against the Soviet Union, a non-religious antagonist, along with the open and competitive denominationalism created through the First Amendment, helped give birth to an environment that allowed for energetic religious pluralisation. The overwhelming numbers of Protestants in the United States meant that, though technically a country where a diverse group of religions interacted and co-existed, there was a strong Protestant dimension to the country's religious character (Corbett and Corbett 1999, 22). The United States was, however, no longer a nation that could deny the varieties of religions that now existed within its borders. Protestantism in the U.S. was always diverse, but the twentieth century created new pressures and a need for all religions, even non-Protestant, non-Christian ones, to be accepted to some degree. The areas of overlap in Protestant theology could now be said to be representative of much of the nation. In the early 1900s Protestant Christianity 'had moved from insecurity in its particularity in the churches to the more secure if less tangible "moral consensus" of the nation itself' (Marty 1961, 180). Though unofficial, the religious sensibility, or moral consensus, that developed during this time can be described as a 'bland, and compulsory set of quasireligious rituals, exemplified [sic] by the 1954 addition of "under God" to the Pledge of Allegiance' and was designed to set America apart from Soviets without showing favour to any particular religion while

simultaneously finding common ground among all (Jacoby 2004, 287). Upon signing this bill into law, President Eisenhower said:

From this day forward, the millions of our school children will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural school house, the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty. To anyone who truly loves America, nothing could be more inspiring than to contemplate this rededication of our youth, on each school morning, to our country's true meaning (Eisenhower Archives).

Eisenhower continued by stating:

Especially is this meaningful as we regard today's world. Over the globe, mankind has been cruelly torn by violence and brutality and, by the millions, deadened in mind and soul by a materialistic philosophy of life. Man everywhere is appalled by the prospect of atomic war. In this somber setting, this law and its effects today have profound meaning. In this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource, in peace or in war (Eisenhower Archives).

Eisenhower's appeals to the religion of the entire nation was only possible because of his inclusive reference to 'religion-in-general' or Eisenhower's 'religious faith' that rests on the 'assumption of a certain form of religious life—namely monotheistic, religious pluralism' that deliberately included 'Jews as well as Christians' (Berger et al. 2008, 29).

During this time popular American religious leaders began to emphasize the unique and favoured place of America in the twentieth century. Leaders like Norman Vincent Peale, Billy Graham, and Fulton Sheen were delivering sermons about the concept of American exceptionalism on television and in churches. Exceptionalism in this case is the idea that God was thought to have selected the United States as receiving His special blessing (Jacoby 2004, 282). The concept of the United States being blessed by God was so entrenched that, by the time of Theodore Roosevelt's presidency, predating Eisenhower's statements above, 'the American

President was expected to fill the role of the “Christian” leader’ (Marty 1961, 181). Later Presidents would continue serving in this unofficial post. In 1952 at an Address to the Freedoms Foundation in New York City, President Eisenhower said that the American form of government ‘has no sense unless it is founded in a deeply felt religious faith, and I don’t care what it is’ (Eisenhower Archives). The idea that America was a country where it no longer mattered what “flavour” your religion was, only that you had some form of religion, would extend into the latter half of the twentieth century and would also colour the events of the early twenty-first.

Despite the popularity of laws like those that instituted the new pledge of allegiance, the late 1950s and 1960s constituted a challenging time for long-held practices and perspectives. These decades saw the growth and success of the civil rights movement, largely because of speeches by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that promoted a message derived from evangelical Christian sources (Ahlstrom 2004, 1076). The movement led by Dr. King culminated with the ‘peaceful convergence on Washington, D.C., of over 250,000 freedom marchers’ (Ahlstrom 2004, 1073) and was an indication of the desire for a new social gospel that would recognize the equality of all Americans (Hall 2004, 1097). The civil rights movement was motivated by religious ideals, typified by the Baptist faith of Martin Luther King, Jr., but also by other religiously motivated leaders like Jesse Jackson, Andrew Young, Malcolm X and Ralph Abernathy, all leaders in their respective religious groups (Lambert 2008, 161). This movement succeeded because it focused on the familiar narrative from America’s Revolution that emphasized freedom from tyranny (Asad 2003, location 2277). African American leaders saw their mission to gain equal rights as akin to the drive of the Apostle Paul to spread the gospel to the world. Therefore, this struggle was thought to transcend religious and national boundaries so

that all peoples could enjoy their ‘God-given rights,’ rights that had been denied to Black Americans for 340 years (Lambert 2008, 161-163).

The 1960s and 1970s were a time of rapid and liberal social change in the United States where the country

*did* experience a fundamental shift in American moral and religious attitudes. The decade of the sixties was a time, in short, when the old foundations of national confidence, patriotic idealism, moral traditionalism, and even of historic Judaeo-Christian theism, were awash. Presuppositions that had held firm for centuries—even millennia—were being widely questioned (Ahlstrom 2004, 1080, emphasis in original).

These changes were due, largely, to the sensibilities of members of a new generation that are now referred to as Baby Boomers. This generation was aptly named. Birth rates exploded after the Second World War and this group was and ‘still is at the vanguard of cultural transformations’ in the United States by sheer weight of numbers (Roof 1999, 3). This group came of age during the 1960s and 1970s and its quest for a more “authentic” and experiential relationship with their spiritual sides constituted the counterculture movement, while also being reminiscent of the sentiments of the first Great Awakening. Though not all Baby Boomers engaged in the counterculture movement, the mood at the time was certainly driven by this generation’s acceptance of it. This period in American history is significant because during this time the country experienced a shift from the conformist ‘thrusts of the 1950s, when what mattered was matching one’s subjective-life with the norms, rules, statuses, and roles of the established order’ (Heelas 2008, 48-49) to one that focused on the personal experience of the ‘inner-life; its potentials and expression’ (Heelas 2008, 48; see also Roof 1999, 232). These sentiments had existed before the decades of the ’50s and ’60s in isolated movements, but as these alternative spiritualities emerged into the foreground of American culture the

counterculturalists were able to form communities rather than exist separately (Fuller 2001, 155). This was a time when Americans born after World War Two could experiment with new religions including ‘Scientology, the Unification Church and the Children of God, or religions that were new to the west, such as Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism’ (Cusack 2011, 411).

The energy of the counterculture movement eventually burned out as more and more conservative groups rose up to reverse the seeming anarchy that the counterculture movement represented (Brown 2002, 21; Lambert 2008, 189; Bellah et al. 1992, 64). With the relative failure of the counterculture movement to create sweeping changes in mainstream American culture, ‘activists and fellow alternative travellers retreated into themselves and disengaged so as to attend to developing the quality of their own lives’ (Heelas 2008, 195-196). Their movement did have a lasting effect in that they brought back, or perhaps exposed, the spiritual sentiments that had existed since Swedenborg and Transcendentalism gained popularity in the eighteenth century.

The narrative created by the civil rights movement, as well as the reinvigoration of spirituality that came with the counterculture movement, reinforced the American religious environment through the broadening of areas where religious people could find common ground to form a kind of ‘overarching spiritual and ideological consensus’ (Marty 1966, 81). However, this time also saw challenges to the overt requirements of religious identity. In 1962 the Supreme Court handed down a decision in *Engel vs. Vitale* (Lambert 2008, 188; Ahlstrom 2004, 1080) that outlawed devotional Bible reading and prayer in public schools, a decision that 76 per cent of the people consulted in a Gallup poll disagreed with (Marty 1966, 80). Ten years later saw the landmark case *Roe v. Wade* that made abortion legal (Lambert 2008, 189) as well as the rise and fall of the Equal Rights Amendment. In reaction to the success of these liberal social movements

and their related legal battles, Evangelical religious groups emerged from their social exile, self-imposed after the disastrous Scopes trial, and into public prominence in the 1970s and 1980s. These conservative Christians saw their way of life being assaulted by the countercultural movement and its effects (Lambert 2008, 189). Most important was the close links between these newly emerged Christians to the Republican Party, particularly with the elections of Jimmy Carter, an open and active evangelical Southern Baptist (Lambert 2008, 191), and the openly Presbyterian Ronald Reagan (Corbett and Corbett 1999, 134-135; Lambert 2008, 191). Part of the reason for the growth of the Christian Right was the shift of large numbers of white evangelicals to the Republican party and demand that the GOP support a return to “traditional” moral values (Lambert 2008, 183). Though many religious Americans do not identify as belonging to the Christian Right, they often support the social positions that it takes, particularly the Christian Right’s fight against the legal status of abortions (Lambert 2008, 185). The high popular profile of the Christian Right and its role in the election of the most powerful politician in the U.S. accentuated the perception of a shared religious and moral sensibility, which would continue into the twenty-first century.

The final decades of the twentieth-century saw further expansion of the Christian Right into political and legal matters. This politically active group was formed in response to the ‘radical politics of the sixties’ and the failings of the public education system that taught young Americans that ‘science, not faith in God, held the key to human progress’ (Lambert 2008, 188-189). An example of one of the concrete changes the Christian Right sought to challenge was the 2003 reversal by the Supreme Court of a previous decision in the case of *Lawrence vs. Texas*. In this new decision, the Supreme Court found that it was unconstitutional for state laws to criminalize sodomy (Hall 2004, 1100-1101). The emergence of loosely organized conservative

religious groups would spearhead the union of diverse members against the perceived deterioration of American morality. These newly visible and very vocal groups also saw themselves as engaged in a culture war that pitted all Christians against “secular humanists” who wanted to minimize or remove God from public life (Lambert 2008, 186). This time in American history has been described as the setting for a very public conflict regarding the state of the nation’s moral core (Roof 1999, 254). The reaction of these newly mobilized religious Americans to the new social realities that materialized during the 1960s drove their renewed energy and conservative Christians began to rally against the issues of ‘abortion, sexual ethics, changing family patterns, and new lifestyle enclaves’ (Roof 1999, 257-258). The Christian Right drove this cultural debate, largely through savvy communications strategies. Evangelical Christians like Tim and Beverly LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Charles Stanley, and D. James Kennedy, who founded the Moral Majority (Lambert 2008, 186), were leaders in this movement, along with Pat Robertson who formed the Christian Coalition in 1989. The goal of these groups was to encourage political activism in order to oppose gay rights and the legalization of abortion while also seeking to gain federal funds for private religious schools (Hall 2004, 1101).

Despite growing public confrontations and discussions regarding the moral state of America, characterizing this period as a “Culture War,” may be misleading. Media attention of the energetic rhetoric of conservative Christians may have inflamed less dramatic, but quite real divisions so that perceptions of clashes were made real through repetition (Roof 1999, 257). The views of the majority of Americans were obscured by this dualistic rhetoric (Roof 1999, 260-261). Regardless of the factuality of the language of a culture war, as a result of these very public debates over national morality the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries saw interdenominational alliances develop where Baptist and Pentecostal religious leaders would

march ‘arm in arm with Roman Catholic bishops and Orthodox Jewish rabbis’ (Swatos 2010, 427).

The union of different religious groups over sex and gender issues would be given another issue with which they could agree upon in September of 2001. The terrorist attacks that occurred in New York on September 11, 2001 brought religious Americans together for reasons other than their views regarding sex and gender. These events caused Americans to seek a sense of unity against an enemy, which the culture of religion provided. The destruction of the World Trade Towers, for what was considered religious reasons, brought religion and religious identity to the forefront of the American group consciousness. President George W. Bush was able to encourage the sentiment at the time through his own personal faith. President Bush, rather than promoting religion in federal programs, encouraged the development of “faith-based” initiatives where the government was able to ‘differentiate between Americans with strong ties to their religious faith and those who were more secular and humanist’ (Lambert 2008, 205). Linking the amorphous “faith” to government programs meant that opposition to these same programs was opposed to faith itself and thus a violation of the entrenched religious freedoms set out in Constitutional Amendments. After the destruction of the World Trade Center, Bush continued his appeal to a unified faith community when, in an Address to the Joint Session of the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress on September 20, 2001, he mentioned the ‘saying of prayers’ in ‘English, Hebrew, and Arabic’ (Whitehouse Archives, 65). His appeals to the religious expressions of prayer in English (Catholic and Protestant Christians), Hebrew (Jewish Americans), and Arabic (Muslim), was an example of how President Bush, an evangelical born-again Christian, accentuated or perhaps reflected the sentiment in America that there was a shared moral foundation that all religious Americans could share during this time of crisis (Lambert 2008, 205-207; Berger et al. 2008,

29). This rhetoric exposed how ‘religious belief and public devotion play a prominent role in the political culture’ of the United States (Gey 2007, 251). The rise of militant Islam had a reactive effect on the mainstream Protestant-Catholic-Jewish traditions that resulted in a reclaiming of the “chosen” narrative of America’s religious identification (Swatos 2010, 431). Interestingly, the inclusion of Arabic in President Bush’s speech shows that Islam was being considered just another of the increasing number of acceptable forms of religion in the United States.

The events of September 11, while strengthening the bonds of all religious people in the U.S., also encouraged the rise of a vocal minority, the so-called “New Atheists” in the United States and Britain. Richard Dawkins, the British biologist and outspoken advocate of Darwinian evolution, became the unofficial leader of this group when he, along with other public figures, interpreted the attacks as a ‘clarion call to defend the values of Western secular liberalism against the rising tides of religious fanaticism’ (Beattie 2007, 2-3). This vocal group continues to work towards the complete dissolution of the influence of religion in the United States and other countries. Though it is still too early to fully appreciate the emergence of this unofficial group, the popularity of its more vocal members has opened up a new avenue for dialogue regarding religion and secularism in the United States (Cimino and Smith 2010, 139).

The United States has been filled with religious people from the time as a British colony to its first decade and a half of the twenty-first century. The Deism of the founding fathers, instead of setting up a purely secular country, created a country where religions of all types could form, flourish, and splinter free from government interference. However, non-religious individuals have existed throughout America’s history and have had a different experience of life in this country, an experience that has come to the forefront in the twenty-first century.

#### 4. The Unintended Effects of a Religious Atmosphere in Twenty-First Century America

From this brief and selective history of the United States and the ways that religions have interlaced themselves within the cultural consciousness of Americans, we can see that the result of the country's nearly 300 years of historical development is a situation where religious belief and identification have become normative.<sup>11</sup> If we extrapolate, based on the above history of the United States, that the religious environment that developed out of a pluralist Christian population has created a hostile environment for non-religious people (Demerath and Thiessen 1966, 680), we can begin to understand the expression of non-religious belief at Camp Quest Montana. The special status for all religions in the United States (though which religion and to what degree have varied over time) has enabled an explosive growth in available options for Americans to be religious. So much so that public opinion polls indicate that 'more than 90 percent of all Americans believe in some kind of Higher Power' causing some scholars to claim that the United States is 'the most religious nation on earth' (Fuller 2001, 1; Berger et al. 2008,

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<sup>11</sup> This chapter references several authors that use the term "civil religion" in their discussions about American culture and society. Robert Bellah, using a Durkheimian perspective, popularized this term which sought to identify those features of American society that bound all citizens together (Berger et al. 2008, 29). This term will not be used here. The term has several problems that may actually hinder analysis when we are discussing non-religion in the United States. The concept of civil religion seeks to separate the concept of religion from American culture, while still maintaining its affects, particularly its morals and religions' ability to foster group identities. Calling something a religion, even a civil one, adds significant weight of meaning to a phenomenon that cannot be objectively observed or discussed. Use of the term should be cautious and always mindful of the impact such use can have. Of paramount importance is the constant weighing of the analytical benefits versus the analytical pitfalls that can come from its use. Undoubtedly, there are values shared by a majority of Americans, but they are nowhere near uniform in expression or degree. Using such a term muddies the water by assuming religion where no religion may exist, and then extends that category to a national scale. Along with "civil religion" Will Herberg's use of the alternative term "American Way of Life" is defined in a way that has little to no difference to Durkheim's definition of religion as the sacralisation of society. At most, there may be some credence to each of Martin Marty, Will Herberg and Robert Bellah's discussions of civil religion in America, but my purpose here is not to prove that a civil religion exists or even assume that it does. Indeed, Bellah et al.'s *Habits of the Heart* was more about how phenomena like Sheilaism could be a starting point for a discussion about 'individualism and its impact on institutions' (Roof 1999, 151). I have used an admittedly condensed description of the role and importance of religion in the United States throughout the country's history to show that religions, through implicit pressures, have been and are currently a prerequisite and chief indicator of American cultural membership and identity. Perhaps this thesis and its findings could be used to further refine conceptions of civil religion, but that is an issue for future study. I prefer to speak of the social or societal atmosphere that was created and is being created currently from out of the history and present of the U.S. rather than use a reified concept that describes a phenomenon that may or may not exist.

60). Despite the promotion of an ostensibly open field for religious membership and belief due to the legally entrenched inability of the country to establish one official national religion, the United States is now home to over two hundred million Christians with almost twenty million people belonging to non-Christian faiths (Pew Institute 2015, 4). The overwhelmingly religious nature of the populace has created a situation where ‘religious scripts are...deeply embedded in the culture’ (Roof 1999, 82), so much so that religious belief and identification have come to symbolize both historical and contemporary pathways to belonging and acceptance within American society. This environment that is filled with religious people who tend to feel some degree of antagonism towards non-religious Americans has created unique difficulties for the people who attended Camp Quest Montana. Numerous studies, discussed below, have shown that this situation has real and significant effects when it comes to the ability of religious Americans to relate to their non-religious neighbours and vice versa. The following sections suggest some of the reasons for this distance and provide real-world examples of the experiences that this distance has caused for the people at Camp Quest.

#### *4.1 America: Filled with Christians*

One reason why religion is thought to be so pervasive in the United States is because a large majority of its citizens identify themselves as Christians. The creation of the United States may have been motivated by Deist or Unitarian principles that represented a rejection of the more supernatural aspects of American Christianity, but as the country grew the influence of a more traditional Christianity (and a small, but growing number of other religions) grew as well, so much so that the United States has become a ‘persistently religious society’ (Cimino and Smith 2007, 411). The various forms of Christianity in America drive the nature of that religious

society. A 2008 report by the Pew Research Institute's Religion & Public Life Project found that over 70 percent of Americans fall under a 'Christian' umbrella that included the categories of Protestants, both Evangelical and mainline, Black Churches, Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Orthodox Christians, and Other Christians (Pew Research Institute 2008, 12). From this perspective, the creation of a largely Christian religious environment in the United States makes complete sense in that it was a reflection of the identifications of the American population. This phenomenon is exhibited everyday in America with Phil Zuckerman stating in an article comparing non-religious orientations in the U.S. and those found in Scandinavian countries that

*religion is much more widespread and pervasive in the USA than it is in Scandinavia.* In the United States, religion is constantly broadcast on the television and radio; politicians wear their religion on their sleeves, fundamentalism is alive and well, Biblical literalism is prevalent, sports events begin with prayers, [and] children must recite a prayer-like declaration which includes a reference to God every morning in every public school (Zuckerman 2012, 18 emphasis in original).

In an America permeated by religion so much so that it can be described as having a culture of religion, those who are non-religious stand out as abnormal.

Despite the majority of the American population being Christian, the numbers and makeup of non-religious Americans, who could be labelled as somehow abnormal, is growing. The aforementioned study by the Pew Research Institute also showed that the percentage of people in the United States who consider themselves religiously 'Unaffiliated,' a category that Pew divided into 'Atheist,' 'Agnostic,' and 'Nothing in Particular,' has risen to 16 percent of the population over the last 5 years (Pew Research Institute 2008, 5). This survey also found that this category was being bolstered by people who were formerly religious. Almost 9 percent of Unaffiliated respondents had left the religion of their childhoods (Pew Research Institute 2008,

24). Though the ‘Unaffiliated’ category from this study is not designed to include non-religious individuals as I have defined them, this category is where non-religious individuals are inarguably located. The growing numbers of Americans who do not identify as belonging to some form of religion and a concurrent reduction in the numbers of Americans that do (Pew Research Institute 2008, 24) means that the status of non-religious Americans is becoming increasingly important in the twenty-first century. This growing population of non-religious Americans will, more and more, come in contact with their religious neighbours, which could increase potential tensions between these groups.

#### *4.2 Religion’s Primacy and the Assumption of Shared Religious Sentiment*

There is a persistent but tacit assumption in the United States that every American is or should be religious. This assumption has caused significant problems for the people at Camp Quest Montana. An incident, described by Abby, the organizer of Camp Quest Montana, reinforces how the Camp Questers experience the culture of religion. While on a five-day trip, Abby was not able to leave her children in the care of a babysitter without that babysitter proselytizing to her young sons. Abby communicated that while she and Jed were gone, they had left their two youngest sons, Fred and Barney, with a neighbour. This neighbour, knowing that Fred and Barney were not religious, took them to church almost every one of those five days. Abby, describing her return home, said:

the minute we get home from the airport Barney starts babbling away ‘she took us to her church. We were at her church three out of five days and I was scared. And I didn’t like it there and I told her we were uncomfortable.’ And Fred pipes in ‘we told her we don’t believe. We told her we were atheists.’

Abby was incensed and continued, stating:

As an atheist I know this girl, she's seventeen, I would never, out of respect for her father who I'm friends with, I would never take her to an atheist meeting and tell her 'you know that crap your dad's been telling you about Jesus for the last seventeen years, you know its crap.' I would never do that out of respect for him and what he chooses to teach his children. I would never ever take my Mormon friends, my Christian friends, I would never intrude on their right to parent the way they want to parent. It's just respect. I wouldn't do it to my sister, I wouldn't do it to my brother, I would never intrude on another parent's right to parent the way they want to, but they intruded on my right to parent.

This experience was not the only one of its type recounted by the parents at Camp Quest and shows that there exists an assumption that religious belonging and belief are beneficial for all Americans as well as pointing to a particular blind-spot when it comes to acceptable behaviour concerning the encouraging of religious teachings.

Lily, James, and their daughter Hermione also experienced an issue where religious Americans unintentionally forced religion into their lives. James and Lily were two of the most interesting parents who attended Camp Quest. They had created a life for themselves where they could spend much of their year travelling around the country. James and Lily both trained as software engineers who were raised in New York but now live in Austin, Texas. They were both also raised in Catholic households. For James, the kernels of doubt regarding religion were seeded when he read the Bible as a teenager. He has no problem with people being religious, but what he rails against is when religious belief or identification is accepted without question. He would prefer that religious people show some sense that they have 'thought about it' and have become religious as part of a process including reasoned thought and critical assessment rather than blind faith. He characterizes religious belief that is not self-critical as being when 'some people are comfortable with a simple answer.' Lily actively tried to instil a sense of wonder in Hermione and used narrative to do so. She actively engaged Hermione with religious beliefs by framing them as stories including Native American creation stories that talk about how evil came

into the world. Lily reported that Hermione found those stories interesting but Lily made sure that Hermione was aware of the vast variety to these stories found in different religions.

Hermione was the only girl in the younger children age group and so her time was largely spent with her mother. She was very quiet during the non-structured camp activities, but calling her shy would be inaccurate. She had no problem interacting with others during group discussions when asked directly. During an organized presentation on science, Hermione showed her creative side when Jed asked her to build a myth about how pinecones gained their distinctive shape. Also, at one point during the week, a friend of Abby's came to the camp and brought her numerous young daughters, which significantly increased the amount of girl-oriented activities, and the level of chaos. During this time Hermione was practically a different person. She was running around the camp and having multiple conversations with girls her age, often simultaneously. Hermione was still quite young and so her non-religion was not as easily deduced. Because her parents read her stories from various religions, for a time Hermione believed in Zeus, but was also described by her father as 'free-ranging' in regards to what and how she believed anything. Hermione's parents want to talk to her about the vast variety of ways that people are religious or the different ways that people believe, but admitted that at this age Hermione was not quite ready for that level of discussion.

The incident where they felt that religion was being forced onto them happened as a result of moving their homeschool co-op into a new church basement. Their story exposes one aspect of the pervasive culture of religion in the United States and where they felt that their non-religion was not being fully respected, or even considered by a religious American. Lily described the situation:

The big issues right now is the new church that they're considering using wants all of the teachers, which is all of the parents, to take a class called "Protecting God's Children" not "our children," but "God's" children.

This course was a training course that would outline safe ways to work with children and did not have any inherently religious content. The issue for Lily and James was that the name of this course assumed that those individuals in the co-op would not have any problem attending a class that was about "God's" children.

These incidents point to a pervasive tendency for religious Americans to see nothing wrong with trying to expose non-religious Americans to religious beliefs. The religious people in the above accounts were not insidious in their attempts to introduce religious ideas or influences to the people at Camp Quest Montana. The Americans discussed above saw nothing wrong with taking openly non-religious children to church almost every day, or making it mandatory for non-religious parents from an openly secular co-op to take a class that references God. That in itself is an indicator of how religion is simply something assumed to be normal and acceptable in everyday interaction in the United States.

#### *4.3 America's Limited Tolerance*

In the above discussion regarding the culture of religion that has developed in the United States, I am not trying to show that Christian Americans are intolerant of non-Christian Americans. They do not act in the ways presented above out of malice, but out of a form of obliviousness when it comes to religion, or in this case non-religion. In fact, in recent years studies have shown that Americans are actually becoming more tolerant over time, but these increases in general tolerance do not extend to non-religious Americans. Of particular importance is a 2006 study by Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartman regarding the

ability of a non-religious person to be voted in as President of the United States. Gallup data taken from an article by Edgell et al. showed that Americans displayed a distinct hesitation to vote for a qualified person who was an atheist and who matched their party affiliation to be their presidential candidate (2006, 215). In this study, the non-religious groups were compared to Catholics, Jews, African Americans, and Homosexuals. We can see this phenomenon in action every four years as hopeful presidential candidates have to “check the religious box” and publicly attend the church of their choice in order to establish their religious membership. In the case of possible presidents there is an implicit need for them to be Christian (Gey 2007, 251; Beattie 2007, 6). For Americans, the denomination of Christian matters very little, although the past campaigns of Mitt Romney, a Mormon, for President, demonstrates that a person’s Christian denomination can still affect their likelihood to be voted into the post.

This study found that, overall, Americans are becoming consistently more accepting of those who are not exactly like themselves, at least in terms of being willing to vote for a Catholic, a Jewish American, an African American for president. Data from 1999 show the values for acceptance of a Catholic, Jewish, or African American president had practically converged, with each exceeding 90 percent who would be willing to vote for each category. In that same period, Americans’ willingness to vote for an atheist or a homosexual to be their president went up, but did not rise past 50 percent. Interestingly, the data indicating a willingness to vote for a homosexual from 1978 showed an atheist being more favourable, but that position had reversed by 1999 (Edgell et al. 215). Though the people at Camp Quest have no reason to be aware of this study, the results presented in it are evident in their everyday experiences, and have created a situation that makes non-religious Americans feel culturally and politically isolated from the rest of America (Gey 2007, 251).

As America becomes more accepting of others, this welcoming embrace has little real effect for non-religious Americans. The gains by other groups have negligible effects for non-religious Americans because the gains that the atheist category saw were nearly parallel to the gains made by other groups (Edgell et al. 2006, 211). Though the findings show that Americans are more accepting of others, the net gain for atheists and other non-religious people relative to the other groups is essentially zero. The on-the-ground difference for non-religious Americans has not changed, viewed as relative to other groups. Gaining acceptance in *parallel* with other groups does mean more acceptance of the non-religious in American society, but on the everyday level these increases are lessened when those same non-religious people are faced with a consistent and sizeable gap in acceptance between themselves and almost all other groups in the U.S. Admittedly, the data used in Edgell et al.'s study is out of date as it shows results from 1999, but a more recent Gallup poll reported very similar numbers. This 2012 Gallup poll shows that there is almost parity between several groups in the United States but two groups show a distinct gap between themselves and those of other groups, namely Atheists and Muslims, with Gays or Lesbians slightly above these two groups, but nowhere near the rest (Gallup.com).

The decrease in levels of discrimination in the United States against multiple religious groups only exacerbates the differences between religious Americans and non-religious Americans because enforcement of the boundaries between the two has a dual function of excluding others who do not exhibit certain social traits while cementing together those who do (Edgell et. al 2006, 211). Factor this in with a growing sense of religious pluralism in the United States (Hout and Fischer 2001) and you get a system that is more likely to view religious believers as part of the whole while those who do not believe in recognizably religious ways become the only real group that can be considered outside of this norm (Edgell et. al 2006, 211).

This process happens because as the area of difference between people of different faiths diminishes, in this case a group consisting of the majority of Americans, there is a concurrent broadening of the perceived difference between self-identified *religious* Americans and those who self-identify as non-religious (Cimino and Smith 2010, 151). Effectively, as the religion becomes a marker of membership in the United States everyone who is religious can remain different while also maintaining a similar identity (Byers and Tastsoglou 2008, 8). Clearly, the growing tolerance of Christian Americans to religions that have traditionally been thought of as “different” has not trickled down to non-religious Americans, but why might that be?

#### *4.4 The Link Between Religious Identification and Morality*

One of the reasons that non-religious Americans are less accepted by their religious peers is the concept perpetuated by America’s culture of religion that if a person is not religious then there is something important missing from their lives. According to the people at Camp Quest Montana, based on their own experiences, if a person in the United States is unable or unwilling to identify with some form of recognizable religious tradition, then they are assumed, at best, to be less trustworthy, or, in a worst-case scenario, completely immoral. This assumption has had significant impacts on both the professional and personal lives of the Camp Questers, forcing them to adopt expressions that are less than honest when dealing with religious Americans. Tom is a successful lawyer in Michigan and the husband of Liz, who, as you will remember, founded Camp Quest Montana with Abby. Tom’s non-religious leanings developed in university, where he read Nietzsche and Kant and determined that ‘of course God was created by man.’ After getting married in a church he laments that he began to fall into the same religious habits that he

rejected. He found it hugely hypocritical that he baptized his children and hated that he ‘had thrown it all out and then went right back to it.’

Tom’s professional life has been constantly influenced by his being non-religious. As part of his legal practice Tom is often asked if he is a Christian. He interprets this question as a moral litmus test and in order to pass this test his default answer has been ‘well, I was raised Catholic.’ He does not want to appear immoral or entertain discussion about his non-religion. He expressed fears that if he identified himself as being non-religious his clients would think him dishonest, but implying that he had some form of Christian heritage, in this case his lapsed Catholicism, he changed that judgement and somehow passed a morality test for his clients. After hearing this, Abby also stated that she will often say that she was “raised Catholic” in order to bypass discussion about her non-religion.

Evidence shows that Tom’s experience is not unique. Religious Americans do not fully accept their non-religious neighbours due to an assumption of immorality and self-interest wherever religious beliefs are thought to be absent (Edgell et al. 2006, 227). In other words, Americans distrust those who are not religious. Much of this distrust stems out of the opinion that morality is not possible without some form of belief in God (Gervais et al. 2011, 1191). Tom thought that this perception was because non-religious Americans like himself and his family ‘have no one telling us what we can’t do’ and that religious Americans thought that because of this ‘we have no reason not to kill and murder and rape because [there are] no consequences.’ To which Lily added, religious Americans think non-religious people can ‘do whatever we want because you don’t have any beliefs whatsoever’ which amounted to assumptions that Lily and James had ‘no moral compass.’

Tom and Abby's common solution of professing a connection to the religion of their childhoods, no matter how tentative, exposes one of the consequences of not holding religious beliefs and provides a glimpse into the everyday experience of non-religious individuals in the United States. In contrast to their teenage children, they do not feel comfortable talking about their non-religion, and, until very recently, had no vocabulary with which to do so that held the same weight as religious identification and language.

## **5. Belief Language as the Path to Acceptance**

The main reason for the Camp Questers to develop a language of belief is so they can express their non-religion to religious Americans. In the United States morality has become synonymous with religious belief, which makes non-religious Americans appear as a moral wildcard (Gervais et. al 2011, 1202) to those Americans who believe morality is only derived from religion. The importance of being able to express yourself through religious beliefs is evident in a statement by Robert Orsi who writes:

The word *belief* bears heavy weight in public talk about religion in contemporary America: to "believe in" a religion means that one has deliberated over and then assented to its propositional truths, has chosen this religion over other available options, a personal choice unfettered by authority, tradition, or society (Orsi, 2005, 17-18).

When combined with the weight of the United States' historical religious culture, the implications of Orsi's statement to non-religious Americans should not be overlooked. For most Americans, expressing religious belief carries with it an assumed internal struggle and some sense of personal meaning, an assumption that in the minds of Americans cannot be extended to non-religious individuals. This has been exacerbated by Americans becoming more aligned on cultural matters that touch on the 'public regulation of moral choices' particularly abortion (Hout

and Fischer 2002, 168) and issues of sex as we saw in the discussion of the religious history of the United States in the twentieth-century. In other words, in the minds of most Americans, being religious and being able to express religious beliefs means that there exists a common set of values and that those who have those values can be expected to behave morally in society. Part of this may be the assumption that people of various religious faiths can be assumed to act in accordance with the dictates of their own deity out of fear of retribution, or the sense of being constantly observed by said deity (Gervais et. al 2011, 1191, 1200). Regardless of the reasons, when a person self-identifies as religious in the United States, and along with that comes the assumption that they have at least some religiously motivated beliefs, they are labeled as moral and they share a moral vocabulary.

The people at Camp Quest Montana, because there are no standard or institutional ways to talk about non-religion, are denied a shared vocabulary with which to express themselves.

When talking about a group trip to Glacier National Park, Abby said that the children are

struggling to find words where a religious person might say ‘I felt God, this is God’s country.’ The children are struggling to explain how they felt connected and how they felt connected to the universe, how they felt connected to the planets. We’ve been stargazing, and they want to say that they feel connected to the rest of the planet, the rest of the universe and they don’t know how to make it fit.

Part of Camp Quest Montana’s purpose is to help fill in this vocabulary or wrest absolute control of belief discourses from the religious communities of the United States. According to Abby, the ability of both the adults and children at Camp Quest to express themselves through beliefs is important because

[w]e’re trying to teach them to speak in positive terms. One of the things that we notice when people ask them ‘You’re an atheist, what does that mean?’ We find them answering “It means I don’t believe in anything.” And we’re trying to teach them to stop answering in the negative. To answer in the positive, to use

positive language and to say “I believe in...” and “I believe we can find answers to what makes us sick. I believe that science can help me to discover ...I believe that we can build a rocket that takes me to the edge of the universe.” For them, unfortunately, the lingo that comes along with living in the public sphere teaches them to answer in the negative all the time. “I don’t believe in anything. I don’t believe in blah, blah, blah.” Because their response is often to react to the religious language that permeates our everyday existence and that’s unfortunate.

Beliefs, therefore, are the tools of expression employed by the Camp Questers to counter the negative assumptions that religious Americans hold regarding non-religious people. They are an answer to the stigma attached to being non-religious, a stigma that has led some at the camp to express their beliefs using a negative terminology or pragmatic shorthand that often obscures the positive belief system held by many non-religious people. The parents at Camp Quest Montana are dissatisfied with how they and their children have responded to past questions regarding what their non-religion meant by saying “It means I don’t believe in anything,” and part of the experience gained at Camp Quest is to provide the tools necessary to formulate and effectively express what this group of non-religious individuals believe. In an environment where religious belief is perceived as normative, it is much easier to articulate what is not believed in, thus negatively defining yourself as “not those people,” but that can only go so far in defining what a group or community actual is, and certainly does not help you feel included in larger, even national, communities.

The relatively new phenomena of non-religious individuals adopting and expressing a discourse that includes non-religious beliefs aids in our discussion because it is quite possible that the causes of increasing levels of acceptance for difference indicated by the Gallup data discussed earlier have also been acting on the non-religious Americans, but are essentially having the opposite effects. In other words, as religious Americans come to see each other, regardless of denomination or faith, as having something essential in common, non-religious

Americans have less access to feelings of commonality. This explains how the social processes, shown in the first sections of this chapter, that are equalizing acceptance of other religious groups in the U.S. are also keeping the acceptance of the non-religious at low levels relative to these groups. As people in the United States become more accepting of difference, particularly in regards to non-Christian religions, the ability to belong may have become reliant on the expression of a religious belief, a prerequisite that excludes attempts by non-religious individuals to belong. Through everyday interaction with other Americans they feel that they are in a minority position that has less status than their religious peers and it is that perception that influences them in the formation of beliefs (Cimino and Smith 2007, 418).

The Camp Questers have begun devising expressions that push for equal treatment in society because of the collective identification of most Americans to some form of religion (Cimino and Smith 2007, 411). For the Camp Questers, the adoption of a discourse of beliefs has a strategic benefit, but it forces them to balance on a fine line between expressions that show that they are fully American and belong, while also managing to include their disagreement with the religious aspects of much of American society (Cimino and Smith 2014, 148). The balance is precarious because being openly non-religious in the United States exposes the Camp Questers to social pressures that reveal a preference for all people to express religious belief. As they begin to talk openly about beliefs, they are trying to lessen tensions with religious Americans in a way that is inoffensive and familiar to those same religious people. Adopting a language of belief is a softer expression of their non-religion when compared to the overt and often aggressive rhetoric of people like Richard Dawkins. Belief language rejects the more intense identification with non-religious expression that seeks to end religion's influence altogether, and poses a less overt challenge to the religious status quo. Therefore, the campers should expect less

discrimination based on their non-religion (Cragon et. al 2012, 108). Talking about beliefs, rather than expressions that focus on what they do not believe, is an example of how those at Camp Quest are trying to find areas of similarity and a common parlance that allows them to feel that they are accepted by their religious neighbours or perhaps claim the right of acceptance on the terms already set by the American society at large.<sup>12</sup>

## **6. The Choice to Identify as Freethinkers**

One aspect of this shift in expression is the Camp Questers' use of the term "freethinker" to describe themselves. Calling themselves freethinkers is an important way that the Camp Questers are navigating the religious environment in the United States because its use, along with belief language, allows the Camp Questers to adopt a new way of identifying themselves that can be positively communicated without the stigma of the label "atheist." The parents at Camp Quest do not consider themselves to be raising their children to be atheists, but that leaves open what they and their children actually call themselves. For the most part, the individuals at Camp Quest Montana preferred the term "freethinker" when self-identifying their flavour of non-religion. However, the use of this term was inconsistent and the terms atheist, agnostic, and sceptic were also used. Josh, Liz and Tom's oldest son, talked about how finding a label that is recognized by other Americans is difficult, saying:

I'm like a freethinker. But that kind of term, when you tell a Christian that, they're like "what the heck's a freethinker?" So I usually will tell people [that I'm a freethinker]. But with my friends I normally say I'm agnostic, but a lot of people think agnostics are wishy-washy, so I usually say I'm atheist.

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<sup>12</sup> For other manifestations of this see Cimino and Smith 2010.

At 16 years old, Josh was the oldest and most outgoing teenager found at Camp Quest. He was tall and skinny, even taller than his father, and exuded a charisma that was apparent from the start of camp. Josh was clever and inquisitive and always an active participant in any group discussions throughout my experience at Camp Quest Montana. He was lukewarm regarding his experience at Camp Inquiry the previous year, describing it as:

a lot of sitting around. Either sitting around doing nothing or sitting around listening to some guy who talks to adults and older people giving us the same speech, and we're a lot younger, talking about some Chupacabra or something that we don't care about.

He was concerned that Camp Quest Montana would be a similar experience, but found that Camp Quest's activities and atmosphere suited him. Josh's younger brother Brian was 14 years old and always energetic, with a personality that complemented Josh's. He and Josh looked like they had been assembled from the same parts, but ever so differently. Brian will most likely be as tall as Josh in a few years. He enjoyed how Camp Quest Montana allowed for everyone to have free time rather than have a rigidly structured schedule that everyone had to follow. His only real concern regarding Camp Quest was that he knew that it was a new camp and was worried that there would not be many people.

From an early age, going to church helped inform Brian's non-religion. He said that he had 'never really believed. I sort of thought of church as like a story time thing. You just go and hear stories. I didn't know that people believe it all, legitimately.' During a discussion with the teenagers about how they defined themselves, Brian stated 'I feel like freethinker is just a really good word.' Susan, Abby and Jed's 14 year-old daughter, agreed with this statement. Susan had no memory of a time when she believed in god and who learned most of her ideas about being non-religious from YouTube.

Abby also preferred to call herself a freethinker because it is a term that is ‘sort of all encompassing.’ Jed made a comment that summarized the ideal of what a freethinker, according to this group of people, consists of when he said:

I think the importance is that a freethinker spends as much time at least on those things that we don’t know as those that we do know. We don’t claim an arrogance to have a complete and total explanation of everything that there is, we don’t feel that it’s easy to simplify and put it on a pin-head the way that someone has or many have with a personified god. We recognize that through the history of time it was easiest to describe this unknown...to assimilate all of this unknown with a person that looks like us so we literally created God in our image as opposed to what conventional religion says ‘that god created us in his or her image.’ So throughout time we’ve given this person a different name and yet we’ve always really been talking about the same thing which is not really a person.

Liz, Josh and Brian’s mother, liked the term “freethinker” because it meant that she was

free to believe, you know change my beliefs, have my beliefs change and...I wouldn’t say evolve because I wouldn’t say they get better necessarily, I kind of go through phases, so I think freethinker...I’m comfortable with because it’s not defined, it’s pretty open, which I try to be. Not so open minded that my brain falls out.

Clearly, even within this community, the terms that are available for self-identification are inconsistent and vaguely defined, but they have latched onto “freethinker” as the best way to describe themselves while also acknowledging that it cannot be used in every situation.

The campers shied away from using the word atheist mostly because they thought that it had a negative connotation and was a poor indicator of both how they lived and how they wanted to present themselves. C.J., a confident and magnetic 14 year-old girl from a family where only one parent was non-religious, said that she did not consider herself an atheist because she felt that

atheist is a harsh word and it’s a title and I don’t really like titles. So why should we have a title, we’re just people that believe in what we believe in. So we shouldn’t have to have a title because they’re kind of just ways for people to

bash. Like atheists are blah blah blah blah. I just say I'm an atheist because I know you're just going to bash me anyways.

C.J. mentioned that she also called herself an atheist when she did not 'know what else to say' to which the rest of the teenagers responded, 'yeah.' Toby, a retired gentleman who had travelled from his home in the Pacific Northwest with his companion Sheila and youngest son Paul, indicated that he disliked the term atheist because it focused on a negative, mainly the fact that he did not believe in a theistic deity. Liz did not like the term atheist because 'it says you don't believe in anything,' but describing yourself as a freethinker, according to Liz, leaves your beliefs open to interpretation. Abby wanted this community to adopt a term that 'means something and I think that's the whole problem...agnostic, atheist, bright...they don't stand for anything.' Calling themselves atheists rather than their chosen identifier 'freethinker' was an unfortunate symptom of the difficulty that non-religious Americans have with identifying themselves when the wide range of acceptable categories of religion, and subsequent identifying terms, are denied them.

The prevalence of the word freethinker pointed to a desire of this small group to find some way to unite everyone in the United States who was not religious, yet each person identified themselves using a variety of terms. The availability of a vast community that was internally divided along vaguely understood definitions and self-identifications was thought to be one of the main issues keeping the voices of non-religious people on the sidelines of public debate. Abby commented that

one of the things that the Christians have on us is that they open the floodgates and let everyone in. There's Catholics, Protestants, Lutherans, they all call themselves Christians, but there's a whole bunch of different kinds of Christians so the freethinking movement has all these different kinds of people, all different kinds. Maybe there's the sceptics on one end and the hard-ass atheists on the other end, but there's all these other people in between and if we could just agree to

work together even though we all don't believe the same thing we all believe in science, we all believe in critical thinking, we're all going in the same direction coming at it from a different way. If we could all agree that we want to work for a better world, towards reason, reasonable-ness is a better way to put it.

Not everyone at camp universally accepted the identification of freethinker. Toby brought up a good point when he stated 'I do have a little trouble with the term freethinker because I think it's redundant. I think that if you're a thinker you don't have to be free.' Toby's disagreement with the use of "freethinker," however, did not deter the other campers, both adults and children, from fully identifying with it as their preferred label.

## **7. Conclusion**

The permeation and ubiquity of Christianity in American society is a product of that country's unique history where Christianity, along with some non-Christian religions, were able to grow and fragment and change to fit the shifting contexts of the United States. Christianity have been so successful in intertwining itself into the fabric of American life that American society can be described as having a culture of religion that is dominated by a vaguely Protestant form of Christianity. This culture of religion is a contributing factor to negative assumptions regarding non-religious Americans. This phenomenon also plays an important role in the shape and development of the non-religious expressions found at Camp Quest Montana. Due to their daily interaction with religious Americans, the people who attended Camp Quest Montana expressed feelings that their non-religious identity was causing them to be excluded from the larger American identity; a phenomenon that corroborates the conclusions of the studies mentioned in this chapter which found that non-religious people are thought to be less

trustworthy, less expected to share the same core values, and be far less likely than any other group to gain an American's vote for President.

Despite these perceptions, or perhaps because of them, the people at Camp Quest Montana are a group that publicly wants to express their non-religion and part of that expression is the utilization and expression of non-religious beliefs. Their focus on expressing non-religious belief is a reflection of the complex process that has facilitated the connection of diverse *religious* faiths under the banner of 'believers' while also making this amalgamated category synonymous with morality, decency, and American life. By using a language that includes beliefs, the people at Camp Quest are challenging the notion that morality is inherently linked to religiosity, while also working toward higher levels of inclusion for themselves and other non-religious people within this religion-steeped environment. By creating a place where children and adults are exposed to other non-religious people who have non-religious beliefs, the families at Camp Quest Montana provide an opportunity for the children to learn new ways of communicating and determining for themselves what it is they believe in a nurturing and open environment and provide them with the tools to express those beliefs in ways that lead to engagement and integration, rather than exclusion.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **BEYOND BELIEF: SPIRITUALITY THROUGH SCIENCE**

Where the previous chapter discussed why the people at Camp Quest Montana had begun to express themselves using beliefs, this chapter presents the content of those beliefs. A language of belief allowed the campers to talk to religious Americans using familiar terms, thus mitigating some of the assumptions that those same Americans might have regarding non-religious people. It is not enough, however, to simply say “Hello religious American! As you can see I do, in fact, have beliefs, so all those things you thought about me are wrong. Let’s be friends.” There had to be some form of socially acceptable content to the beliefs for their expression to have any lasting effects in the Camp Questers’ lives. In order to endow their belief expressions with content and meaning, the Camp Questers access feelings of connection to the universe, each other, and the environment that are derived through an appreciation of science and scientific discovery that they term to be spiritual in nature. Similar to some of the nonreligious Americans found by Frank Pasquale’s study of Americans in the Northwest of the US (Pasquale 2007, 54), the people at Camp Quest Montana use these spiritual aspects to break down the boundaries between themselves and religious Americans. Also, through their emphasis on the scientific foundation of those spiritual aspects, the campers are differentiating themselves from those same Americans.

The content for the beliefs found at Camp Quest was encountered during a formal activity organized by Jed, the doctor introduced in the previous chapter. It was one of the most important organized events at camp and consisted of a lecture and a presentation, followed by a directed discussion regarding the benefits of science over religion. It involved slides that showed the wonders of the natural world like the crashing of waves, or the vastness of space. Of particular

importance was the presentation of what an understanding of science could provide for the lives of the campers, which was an extension of Jed's desire to show how knowledge of science and nature could develop into a form of spirituality. This was possible because, Jed argued, a deep knowledge of biology, particularly evolutionary theory, could affect and raise a person's levels of compassion and general moral grounding. The terminology used was reminiscent of religious language with Jed stating that he recognized the 'wonder and glory of the universe.' Also during this presentation, Jed conveyed to the group what he understood to be the differences between his scientific understanding of the world and those derived from religions. He viewed the origins of religion to be when people needed answers that could not possibly, at the time, be answered, an understanding that somewhat mirrors those of Freud, Tylor, and Frazer discussed in Chapter One. Though the teenagers seemed quite interested in continuing the presentation, as the morning progressed the younger children grew noticeably dis-interested in the talk and expressed their desire to go outside, watch YouTube videos, or, to my eternal horror, sing Justin Bieber karaoke.

What the campers actually meant when they were talking about their spiritual experiences remained somewhat vague or, at the very least, was conceptualized differently among the campers. While discussing their feelings of connection each camper talked about how they conceptualized their spiritualities. Brian thought that spirituality meant simply 'beliefs' while Liz thought that spirituality was 'feelings.' Toby, the retired camper mentioned in the previous chapter, provided a particularly interesting answer when he said that spirituality was a complexity that could finally be understood. Their exploration and expression of spirituality that was developed out of scientific exploration of the known world provides a glimpse at what is

actually going on when the people at Camp Quest Montana develop and express non-religious beliefs.

This chapter begins with a brief presentation of some of the difficulties in discussing beliefs from an academic perspective. It is a problematic term because its use has been dominated by Christian influences and has led previous studies, particularly into non-Christian peoples, to assume beliefs are being expressed when they may not be. Also, it is assumed where beliefs do exist, or are expressed, that they have the same connotations as in Christian contexts. I argue that despite the inherent problems with the term in academic literature, the importance of beliefs to the Camp Questers cannot be denied and because of this its inclusion in this thesis is warranted, useful, and beneficial. This is followed by an exploration of the actual beliefs found at camp as expressed in the campers' own words. This section details the deep sensation of connection that the campers feel and how they have come to these feelings through experiences like Camp Quest Montana. The nature of the beliefs themselves provides links to the next section, which provides a larger discussion of how the people at Camp Quest Montana engage with the spiritual aspects of American culture, mediated through the construction of beliefs that they understand to be based on scientific understandings of the world. I argue, in the final section of this chapter, that the beliefs themselves and their linkages to spirituality are tools that allow the Camp Questers to simultaneously break down and construct social barriers between themselves and religious Americans.

### **1. Belief is a Problematic Term**

The basic conception of belief is that it is an expression that says something true about the world, or to be more specific, beliefs are statements about what a person *thinks* is true about

the world. These are considered propositional beliefs with Abby Day describing them as truth claims about reality (Day 2010, 10). If only I could dust off my hands and take this as the foundation for the discussion of the beliefs at Camp Quest Montana. However, saying a person ‘believes’ something is not as clear a statement as I would like and taking the beliefs of the campers as simply propositional statements about the world would not be giving them proper respect and attention. By talking about beliefs in their time at Camp Quest Montana, the campers are giving us a glimpse of what it means to be non-religious in the United States, and for these people, that experience is one where they believe. However, I must not dive haphazardly into a discussion of those beliefs because use of this term brings with it a weight of history that can skew description, and perhaps even obscure what is actually presented by those being studied. Dealing with belief, at one point, had become so problematic that it was argued, by some of the scholars mentioned below, that the very use of the term should be done away with. However, the explicit use of beliefs by the people at Camp Quest Montana necessitates its inclusion here.

Belief can mean many things. Rodney Needham goes over the many possible meanings of “believe” in English stating that the familiar usage of the term can be augmented by

a consideration of current idiom, in which ‘to believe’ may also connote ‘to suspect’, ‘to expect’, and so on. In American English, moreover, the idiom is yet further extended, and a much greater use is commonly made of ‘believe’: e.g., ‘I do believe’ may express a simple statement of opinion; ‘I believe I won’t’, in response to an offer of a drink, just means ‘No, thank you’; and such phrases as ‘I do believe I don’t care to’, as a polite form of refusal, emphasize even more the everyday reliance on belief-statements (Needham 1972, 40).

Belief is also a difficult concept to define because each of its various uses overlaps, with meaning from one possible use bleeding into the next. Their superficially simple expression, however, can come packaged with social meaning that is contextual rather than empirical. These meanings can contain ‘non-literal, symbolic, ethical or social commitment[s]’ (Mair 2013, 448)

which complicate any discussion concerning belief. Belief has a wealth of uses and meanings, but it is of utmost importance that we understand those meanings to be contextually developed and dependent. This means that the expression of beliefs form part of an epistemological understanding that may not reflect or be accessible to the epistemology of the researcher. Following Foucault, Abby Day warns us that researchers employing belief already have a store of knowledge regarding the term that is laid down in ‘sedimentary layers of knowledge’ (Day 2010, 10). This means that the term’s ambiguity creates the risk of understanding belief according to our own epistemological foundations and can therefore become a ‘reflection of how [the researcher] produce[s] knowledge’ (Day 2010, 9), which influences any interpretive exercise and any resulting conclusions.

One of the main reasons for the challenge to belief’s utility in academic writings is that there are distinctly English and Christian connotations to belief that confuse meanings or obscure them altogether (Ruel 1982, 27). In *Belief, Language, and Experience* (1972), Needham provides a detailed etymological description of how the word belief developed in the English language out of Judaic and Greek concepts that merged in the Septuagint and were carried into the New Testament, a transmission that influences how we use the term today (Needham 1972, 41, 49-50). However, Needham does differentiate between the religious use of the term and its everyday use with the religious connotation being specific to the combination of Jewish, Christian and Greek concepts while the vernacular use has various meanings based on the culture of its expression (Needham 1972, 50). Therefore, acknowledging the fact that the word belief comes out of a Christian history means that I must be careful not to extend Christian meanings to all belief statements and should not make the opposite mistake of limiting the use of belief to Christian statements (Ruel 1982, 27).

## **2. Should We Throw Belief into Academia's Trash Bin?**

There is a community of scholars that proposes that the above problems in academia's use of belief in socio-cultural analysis must be refined, reconceptualised, or done away with altogether. This group argues that the western and Christian foundations of the term create a muddied view of what is actually being expressed by the people being studied. Among this group, influenced by Rodney Needham, are Malcolm Ruel (1982), Jean Pouillon (1982) and Galina Lindquist and Simon Coleman (2008). Needham's critique of belief was directed at steering ethnographers away from making belief statements about non-Western, particularly non-Christian peoples when engaged in comparative epistemology (Needham 1972, 193). Also, Lindquist and Coleman state, somewhat cryptically, that it is better to write 'against belief' rather than 'with' it (Lindquist and Coleman 2008, 15). To clarify, what Lindquist and Coleman are arguing is for anthropologists to constantly challenge the use of the term (write against it) rather than use it as a stand-in for expressions that we think are beliefs (writing with it). These critics of the use of belief warn scholars not to fall into the trap of assuming a common or popular, and therefore ambiguous, meaning of the term. This group of scholars holds that ethnographers should also be warned off of ascribing the meaning of one word onto another across a cultural and linguistic divide. This can lead to the misrepresentation of the groups being studied and the finding of similarity where none exists, or at the very least over-emphasizing cross-cultural similarity, much like the universalizing analysis done by Tylor and Frazer that ascribed a unified religious sentiment across space and time. However, by engaging with a full and rounded contextualization of the beliefs expressed so as not to misrepresent them from our own biased

perspectives (Mair 2013, 463) the study of belief can provide valuable insight to the experience of non-religious Americans, particularly those at Camp Quest Montana.

### **3. Hazardous Assumptions in the Study of Belief**

Clearly, I must be careful in using belief. I employ it cautiously while fully aware of the problems inherent in its use. The main reason for its inclusion in this thesis is that the people at Camp Quest Montana developed these expressions on their own and through ethnographic observation over the course of a week, those expressions gained substance and their content and meanings could be discerned. Therefore, a discussion and analysis of beliefs that includes their expression and content is justified here, but there are two interconnected assumptions that must be recognized and dealt with in order to use belief in this thesis, assumptions that also carry into the discussion of spirituality below. The first is the assumption that there must be some internal, mental counterpart to the expression of belief, whether that expression be spiritual, religious, or otherwise, and the second is that beliefs are indicative of a shared experience among all people (Needham 1972, 122). Needham is correct that there is no evidence of the expression of belief being representative of some inner state that can be objectively known. Anthropologists have agreed with Needham's point since Durkheim's study of Australian Aborigines, but the solution is simply that we have no other choice. A method to deal with this is to engage with expressions of beliefs as if they are accurately representing the inner landscape of a person's thoughts. To do otherwise would be to ignore data that was being presented by those being studied. If we define belief as a solely interior phenomenon, then we are placing it outside of anthropological explanation (Ammerman 2013, 259) and giving the term a reified or enigmatic status. The fact that we have no empirical way to view the thoughts of another does not mean that we have no

hooks on which to hang an analysis that involves belief. The only, and perhaps the best, tool that we have for discerning the landscape of people's minds is to ask questions, observe behaviour, and take whatever evidence comes of this as accurate according to its self-defined terms.

Focusing on observed behaviour allows me to deal with the second assumption often made when dealing with belief, that there is some shared reality or experience that the beliefs are representative of, and this experience is consistent both within and across communities. This second assumption develops out of the first in that if the veracity of belief statements is not discernable, then we have no way of knowing if everyone's use denotes the same experience, or even if they conceptualize the expression in the same way. The ethnographic nature my work at Camp Quest Montana, however, means that over the course of observation and discussion, participants were given the opportunity to express themselves over the course of a week. During their week at Camp Quest Montana, the people there, and their beliefs, entered into dialogue with one another. The focus of analysis, then, becomes the discussion between Camp Questers rather than the internal mental state of the individuals involved. Also, the second assumption mentioned above means that the beliefs found at Camp Quest should only be taken as representative of this small group while acknowledging the particular contexts, both spatial and historic, out of which these beliefs emerge.

It is not possible to determine whether everyone at Camp Quest Montana held the same beliefs, or if their expressions meant the same for each person. It is also not possible to assume that each of them had a similar experience of the camp. However, through unobtrusive observation over time, the people at Camp Quest have the opportunity to express themselves repeatedly to others of their group who are open and receptive to that expression. It is that

expression that an ethnographer looks for rather than engage in attempts to ascribe some truth- or reality-value to expressions of some mysterious inner state.

Clearly, the concept of belief has caused some discomfort when it comes to studying religion. This discomfort is only made more intense when dealing with expressions of belief in explicitly non-religious individuals. It is clear that the people at Camp Quest Montana do not believe in a god or gods, but an absence of belief, or an active rejection of a belief, on its own, should not be considered a belief (Eller 2010, 6). The people who attended Camp Quest Montana, however, did talk about beliefs and these were developed without a negative expression of non-belief. I fully acknowledge the difficulty in using belief when describing any phenomenon, be it religious or not, and understand that this difficulty arises because of the historical development of the term as well as its somewhat ambiguous use in the English language. The communication of beliefs by the people at Camp Quest, however, makes it impossible to simply ignore belief in this case. This means that I must not simply state that the Camp Questers “believe” something and leave it at that. It is important to this discussion that the way beliefs are used and conceptualized by the people at Camp Quest be viewed through the lens of their own use, and unique contexts.

From the above discussion it is clear that the use of belief in academic analysis must not be casual or done without thought to the implications and assumptions associated with such use. Whenever belief enters into discussion we run the risk of reducing these statements to a ‘body of assertions demanding assent’ (Morgan 2010, 2). Instead, we need to find a way to talk about beliefs in a way that does not marginalize them and that looks at how these statements are features of a lived experience (Miller and Dixon-Roman 2011, 82). So, it is important to clarify the type of believing being discussed here. The way that I conceptualize belief follows from the

analysis of Daniele Hervieu-Léger from her book *Religion as a Chain of Memory* (2000).

The belief that I speak of, and that was found at Camp Quest Montana, is not the belief that requires faith, trust, and obedience, but a belief that reflects Hervieu-Léger's conceptualization where 'believing is belief in action as it is experienced' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 72). This conceptualization means that I can focus on how the belief is expressed and realized through the actions of the people I study. It is a more holistic approach to the study of belief, which includes the previous chapter's discussion of the religious culture found in the United States. That country's particular social, cultural, and political context has shaped the content of the non-religious beliefs that appeared at Camp Quest Montana. These beliefs represent 'all the resources of observance and language and the involuntary action which such belief in its multiple forms displays' (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 72). However, Hervieu-Léger also conceptualizes belief as a body of convictions that are

not susceptible to verification, to experimentation and, more broadly, to the modes of recognition and control that characterize knowledge, but owe their validity to the meaning and coherence they give to the subjective experience of those who hold them (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 72).

Also, Hervieu-Léger's approach makes the inclusion of non-religious beliefs, separate from a discussion of religious beliefs, possible because the beliefs and their expression can be

liberated from the hold of all-embracing institutions of believing, [where] all symbols are interchangeable and capable of being combined and transposed. All syncretisms are possible, all retreats imaginable (Hervieu-Léger 2000, 75).

From this conceptualization of belief we can shed much of the terminological and semiotic baggage that comes from the primary use of belief by religious institutions or history and investigate how it is being used at Camp Quest Montana, the interior experience that the expression of beliefs represent, and the context from out of which those beliefs come.

#### **4. What Exactly do the Camp Questers Believe?**

Using the above discussion of Hervieu-Léger as a guide to the beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana, this chapter now presents the beliefs themselves and their content. The individuals found at Camp Quest Montana use scientific inquiry and the principles established by that inquiry to discern beliefs and moral tenets that they understand as equal to or better than those that are developed from religious teachings. These beliefs are not systematized into creedal statements, but are loosely structured and expressed through personal statements and interactions and should be thought of as narratives of belief (Day 2010, 98).

The foundational belief found at Camp Quest is that through scientific inquiry humans can gain accurate information about the universe. Out of this comes the belief that science has found that we are all connected to each other through our shared biological and chemical makeup. Jed eloquently stated this when he said:

I guess what I believe is that we share a common biology and chemistry with everything that's with us in this earth and everything that's with us in this universe and that that had probably some form of beginning that people smarter than me are working on. But that the beauty of our existence comes from that commonality and how things have evolved along various lines with that common beginning.

Jed continued by talking about how science can be used as a foundation for beliefs when he said:

Where the science fits in for me is to form a foundation upon which to have a belief system [...] In other words because we can explain things around us in the natural world, that I think leads us to a very special view of our existence here and I think it's also helpful at informing positive attributes that I want to encourage in the world, like compassion and social justice.

The moral component to the beliefs being expressed at Camp Quest included the equal treatment of all people, particularly women and members of the LGBTQ community, as well as a generally high level of compassion and respect for the individual.

The feeling of connection to the universe and the material world was of paramount importance to the people at Camp Quest. Frank, Abby and Jed's 15 year-old son, inspired by a night of stargazing on the camp's dock, said

just thinking, looking up at the stars at night like we've done a couple times knowing that almost everything in your body is made up of the stuff from the stars...it makes you feel...connected to everything.

Interestingly, based on Frank's general appearance and demeanour, he was not the type I thought would express himself so poetically about feelings of connection to the universe. Frank's appearance epitomised that of the rebellious teenager with long jet-black hair and the ever-present black T-shirt, emblazoned with the logo of some heavy metal band that I have never heard of. His non-religion developed during Sunday School when he realized what he was being presented was 'ridiculous.' Frank enjoyed Camp Quest Montana because it provided a forum to interact with 'like-minded people.' Frank's sentiments about being made up of 'stuff from the stars' are reminiscent of spiritual expressions that seek to answer questions about where the universe comes from and our role in it, which also speak to something personal and experiential (Fuller 2001, 8-9).

These feelings of connection expressed by the campers reflect the language used in a YouTube video of noted astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson that was shown later that week as part of an informal YouTube session where each person tried to show the others something interesting on the internet. It exemplified how a scientific understanding provides ways to feel wonder when contemplating the universe. In this video, recorded during the Beyond Belief Conference in 2006 organized by The Science Network (Greatest Sermon Ever 2006), Tyson discusses his experience of the universe through a scientific understanding. His language was evocative of a deeply religious person as he described his many trips to observatories to view the

universe as akin to a ‘pilgrimage.’ In this video, Tyson also stated that he was ‘called by the universe’ and that he ‘had no choice in the matter’ and that his work as an astrophysicist is about ‘reaching out to the universe.’ This speech has been dubbed the ‘Greatest Science Sermon Ever’ (Open Culture), and Tyson is aware of the fact that the language he is using is akin to the ways that religious people talk about revelations regarding the divine. Ending his talk, Tyson says that ‘not only are we in the universe, the universe is in us, and I don’t know any deeper spiritual feeling than what that brings upon you.’ This YouTube video was the epitome of the ways that both the adults and children at Camp Quest Montana wanted to think about themselves and their view towards the world around them.

The interconnection of all things is the core of the beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana. Feelings of interconnection have led those at Camp Quest to encourage a belief in a deep respect for the environment as well as for all humanity. Jed stated that he wanted his children to share in this realization and that

when a child can understand, truly understand, evolution then the natural extension of that is they understand how incredibly closely connected they are to one another and to their world. So it would seem that a natural extension of that is a respect for your environment, a recognition of how we may be contributing to global warming problems and how that may become important.

The expressions of a respect for the environment are also reminiscent of deep ecology that ‘insists on the radical interdependence of life on this planet’ while also encouraging a perspective that sees all organic life as a whole rather than separate islands (Fuller 2001, 91).

One of the most difficult issues for the people at Camp Quest to talk about was how they felt about death, dying, and the possibility of an afterlife. Because their view of the world was based on a foundation of scientific understanding, the concept of a heaven or some way to live on after death was not possible. Therefore, the people at Camp Quest had developed a belief in

an agnostic stance toward the afterlife, but one that leaned more toward one not existing. As part of this belief, they wanted to be good people in this life and create a better world while they lived rather than hope for an existence in a perfect world after they die, findings echoed in Phil Zuckerman's book *Faith No More* (2011, 127-128). Abby elaborated on how she felt truly fortunate to have a life at all and said:

we're lucky we're alive [...] Each one of us is a created being, each one of us gets to be alive. This is such a gift. [...] I think you should really work hard to make this life as spectacular as you can make it. To be kind to your fellow human beings, to treat your children right, to raise them up to be kind parents to treat their children right. To make each generation better than the next for your fellow human beings, I think that's the greatest gift for the planet.

This idea that the people at Camp Quest had a different conception of life and life after death than religious people was one of the key distinctions between what they saw as their non-religious beliefs and the beliefs of religious Americans. During a group discussion, the teenagers talked about how they understood religion to give people some assurance that there is some form of existence after we die. Brian and C.J., two of the teenage campers, agreed that religious explanations for the existence of heaven or some other form of idealized existence after death gave solace to religious people, with C.J. saying that it was 'easier to put your faith into that because, you feel like you want it to be there.' She continued, saying that people 'want to live on' and 'no one wants to die and just be like there dead, like done. Everyone wants something else.' Susan, Abby and Jed's 14 year-old daughter introduced in Chapter Two, expressed her own desire for there to be something outside of our human existence and she did not

want to believe that we die and we're just done, but I feel like believing in something else isn't like, doesn't fit into being a freethinker. It kind of confuses me. I have torn feelings about it.

When I asked her where these feelings of confusion came from she answered

I'd like to believe that we come back as something else. I always thought, even when I was little that that's what would happen. But I don't know I feel like being a freethinker I should question that, like you should just be done. I don't know...

C.J. built on Susan's statement, saying that she wanted there 'to be more, but it's more logical that we are going to die and just be dead, but I want there to be more.' Most of the teenagers felt this way about death and an afterlife. C.J. also questioned the existence of reincarnation because if you were reborn in another life then 'you would forget your past life' and so for her there was no effective difference between reincarnation and death. Susan had thought about this too and said that to be reincarnated would be 'almost like you did just stop.' The teenagers also brought up the concept of living forever through your experiences and deeds while you were alive. Brian said that

there's one way that you can secure that you can live on, but it wouldn't be like living, living. Like Darwin, he sort of lives on through history because people still recognize the name. They know Darwin, evolution, George Washington. You can sort of live on that way.

Continuing, Brian affirmed that he thought that this was the only real way to live forever because when it comes to the existence of an afterlife 'you don't really know' that it exists. The one stand out was Frank, the metal band T-shirted teenager, who actually found comfort in the idea that we only have this life in which to live. He stated 'I honestly find that more comforting than eternal life' and thought that 'after living for billions of billions of years I think it would get tiring.'

As a result of observations and interviews with those at Camp Quest we can see that a tentative system of non-religious beliefs are being conveyed. The people at Camp Quest Montana believe that the use and understanding of science can lead a person to the subsequent beliefs that there is innate value shared by all humanity, a person should show respect for the

environment based on their connection to nature, as well as believe in the importance of this life, stemming out of the belief that we must be agnostic regarding the existence of an afterlife. It is important to note that these beliefs are derived from, represent, and even evoke spiritual experiences and expressions for the Camp Questers. The next section focuses on the spiritual aspects of the campers' expressions of their beliefs and how these have developed out of the specific context of the United States.

## **5. Belief Content and American Spirituality**

Americans have incorporated spiritual elements into their religious lives since before the country was a country, but this undercurrent did not emerge into the public consciousness until the 1800s, and certainly did not become mainstream until the middle of the twentieth century. The counterculture movement owes much of its success to its ability to tap into this latent spiritual energy and the Camp Questers, along with other non-religious Americans (Cimino and Smith 2007, 411), are using it in much the same way. This section seeks to show that the spiritual nature of the beliefs of the Camp Questers provide cultural tools that are being used strategically as part of a process of breaking, negotiating, and creating new boundaries between themselves and religious Americans. The fact that the beliefs of the Camp Questers are evocative of a larger American spiritual language points to their desire to differentiate themselves from religious beliefs, while also providing them access to a vocabulary that accurately expresses their inner lives.

Beliefs that are linked to spirituality act as a boundary-defining mechanism in a country where religious differences have begun to fade (Roof 1999, 46). Most of the campers talked about how they had experienced spiritual feelings both before and during their time at Camp

Quest. One example is when Josh, who thinks of himself as a Freethinker, described how he viewed the world around him. He said:

For me spirituality is like, a very like, just me kind of thing. I don't really feel like I need to go with someone else to go meditate. That's something that I only do kinda by myself. For me spirituality is like being in nature. Being, like, a part of things. Feeling the sound of the waves crashing. I feel like it has an effect on me somehow. It's like this world is a big thing and you can't just be...I don't really know how to put it. I feel like you have to have some sort of gratefulness some sort of like love for the world itself. Not like a religion. It's not that I want to defend it against anyone. It's kind of just for me.

Though he obviously thought that these feelings were accurate to his experience, he also said '[I] don't necessarily know that it's true, but I know that I feel it.' He found that he had developed this sense of the spiritual at Camp Quest Montana. Josh thought that part of it was the 'beautiful scenery' of the camp's setting that caused him to feel 'the simplest form of spiritual-ness.' Frank described these feelings as an appreciation of the campers' connection to nature because 'knowing that you and that leaf have a lot in common' was an amazing experience. Brian echoed these statements when he said: 'Yeah, connected. That's how I...when I feel spiritual I feel connected.'

This expression of spirituality at a non-religious summer camp exposes how non-religious Americans are mobilizing the already present spiritual resources available and synthesizing them into their own non-religious experience of the world around them. The beliefs themselves are drawn out of the cultural spiritual reservoir and expressed without any reference to religions or easily identified religious sentiment. Also, the substance of the beliefs expressed at Camp Quest enhances a discussion about the development of what has been termed the Spiritual, But Not Religious category in anthropological and sociological research in both Europe and the United States.

## 6. Spiritual, But Definitely Not Religious

Like the definitions of belief found above, defining spirituality, let alone spirituality that is explicit about its difference from a religious experience, is analytically slippery. Historically, the use and definition of the spiritual has been an amorphous concept. Wade Clark Roof writes that

in many languages and cultures, the spiritual was conceived as wind and breath, that which moves, the force that mysteriously and invisibly animates: the Latin *spiritus*, *anima*, and *animus*, the Greek *psyche*, the Sanskrit *atman*, the Hebrew *ruach* (Roof 1999, 34).

By its very nature the term spirituality is incredibly difficult to define, mostly because it can represent so many experiences and perspectives. William James viewed spirituality as consisting of ‘attitudes, ideas, lifestyles, and specific practices’ based upon a conviction where ‘the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance,’ and that experiencing a ‘union or harmonious relation with this “spiritual more” is our true end’ (qtd. in Fuller 2001, 8). Regardless of the difficulty of definition, integrating spirituality into this discussion of the content of the Camp Questers’ beliefs provides important avenues for analysis.

The difficulty in using spirituality when analyzing expressions and experiences of non-religious people is the loose perceptual linkages that the spiritual has to the religious. The people at Camp Quest Montana are expressing feelings of connection to the universe that evoke sentiments of spirituality, but we should hesitate to categorize these expressions as religious. I admit that it is difficult to separate non-religious spiritual expressions from religious ones because the two often overlap significantly in word usage. Also, the difficulty is compounded when comparing religious expressions because spirituality is ‘widely reported within *different* mainstream forms of religion’ (Heelas 2008, 54, emphasis in original). So we have a situation

where scholars are investigating phenomena where the people being studied are using similar terms to refer to what may be very similar phenomena, but may also be vastly *different* expressions that just sound the same. Fuller states that both religion and the spiritual

connote belief in a Higher Power of some kind. Both also imply a desire to connect, or enter into a more intense relationship, with this Higher Power. And, finally, both connote interest in rituals, practices, and daily moral behaviors that foster such a connection or relationship (Fuller 2001, 5).

The people at Camp Quest Montana exhibit this desire to connect and are intimately concerned with daily moral behaviours, but they do not necessarily conceive of the universe and their connection to each other as a Higher Power so we should be cautious not to ascribe religious sentiments to the spirituality found there.<sup>13</sup> To do that would run the risk of obscuring the nature of a phenomenon by loading it with meanings that it may or may not have. The Camp Questers' beliefs are spiritual in the sense that they relate to their feelings of connection to the universe, the earth, and each other, and are suggestive of a spirituality that is located in the

core of the self, in connection to community, in the sense of awe engendered by the natural world and various forms of beauty, and in the life philosophies crafted by an individual seeking life's meaning (Ammerman 2013, 268).

The distinction that the Camp Questers make, however, is that the foundations of their spirituality, based on science, are explicitly distinct from the foundations of religious forms of spirituality.

Though the definitions of the spiritual can be somewhat murky, the research on spirituality and those who define themselves as "spiritual, but not religious" agrees that spirituality is an intensely personal, individual experience that also denies rigid external authority. This features heavily into the beliefs of the people at Camp Quest Montana. Though it

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<sup>13</sup> I am also aware that the inclusion of a Higher Power in Fuller's definition tends more towards a substantive definition of religion rather than a functional one.

does not necessarily constitute a belief expressed by the Camp Questers, there was a constant emphasis at camp on maintaining a rejection of certainty. This extended to scientific findings, the claims of religions, and even the beliefs expressed by the campers themselves. Sheila, who came with Toby and his son Paul and was the only person who came to Camp Quest Montana that was not directly related to a camper,<sup>14</sup> made a statement that exemplified how the campers had internalized this rejection of certainty. She thought that there was something inherently beautiful about not knowing all the answers and felt peaceful when she realized the mystery of existence rather than anxious or frightened. In regards to not being certain of many things, Abby, continuing along the same lines as Sheila, stated that:

what people don't understand is that I'm totally okay not knowing. It really doesn't bother me not to have answers. I really love when there's a new scientific discovery.

For Tom, this rejection of certainty was another aspect of his non-religious beliefs that separated him from religious explanations of the world. He found his own Catholic upbringing had habituated a need for certainty in himself, but he wanted more for his children. He said that

I want my children to push and never accept the box that we currently have as our answer and always be looking outside of that box, because I think that we are continually going to find that there are more answers. [...] I want my children to not be given a box that they can conveniently open and enjoy because that was what was given to me and many times along my path I just went back to the box.

Tom felt that religion provided him with a set of ready-made answers that helped him interpret and navigate the world around him, but those answers no longer felt real to him and having them available was becoming more of a hindrance in his life than a benefit. He was frustrated by how, when stressed, he often found himself thinking in those same religious ways and did not want

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<sup>14</sup> I am not including myself in that group.

that to be a part of his children's lives. The rest of the parents at Camp Quest echoed his desire for his children to have endless possibilities for how they think about the world.

Descriptions of the Camp Questers' rejection of all certainty that includes, to a certain extent, claims by scientific authorities mirrors research that finds people who identify as spiritual to be 'concerned with the individual's right, even duty, to establish his or her own criteria for belief' and these beliefs 'must be tested by experience' (Fuller 2001, 75-76). This dovetailed with a tendency for Americans who were not religious, but yet had spiritual inclinations to

associate genuine faith with the "private" realm of personal experience rather than the "public" realm of institutions, creeds, and rituals. The word *spiritual* gradually came to be associated with the private realm of thought and experience while the word *religious* came to be connected with the public realm of membership in religious institutions, participation in formal rituals, and adherence to official denominational doctrines (Fuller 2001, 5).

Roof, based on his investigation of the Baby Boomer generation in the United States, contends that the rejection of authority and emphasis on individualism means that a spiritual experience 'comprehends but cannot be contained by intellect, cognition, or institutional structure; it reaches out for unity and the ordering of experience; it abhors fixity in the interest of transformation' (Roof 1999, 34). Roof found that for Americans that emphasized the spiritual, 'the quest is for something more than doctrine, creed, or institution' and that what these same people were looking for had 'to do more with feelings, with awareness of innermost realities, with intimations of the presence of the sacred—what amounts to the very pulse of lived religion' (Roof 1999, 33-34; see also Zinnbauer et al. 1997, 551, 561).<sup>15</sup> From this, it is not surprising that the people at Camp Quest Montana have adopted a spiritual foundation for their beliefs, derived out of their

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<sup>15</sup> Carole Cusack is critical of Roof's theorizing about spirituality, arguing that Roof may give too much weight to the concept of the spiritual marketplace based on consumer models that focus on the surface levels of spirituality that conceptualize spirituality as 'idle toying by people who do not know much about it' (Cusack 2011, 413).

understanding of a scientific view of the natural world that comes pre-packaged with the tendency to reject certainty and traditional sources of authority.

## **7. Spirituality's Ability to Destroy and Create Boundaries**

Presenting the expression of beliefs in the previous chapter was only the first step in understanding the people at Camp Quest Montana because the beliefs themselves and their links to spirituality are performative. They *do something* for the people that express them. They work to create the world that the Camp Questers navigate, and more importantly, they help the Camp Questers negotiate for available space in American society (Cimino and Smith 2010, 139). For the people at Camp Quest Montana, performative beliefs derived from a sense of spirituality help to create the notion of who the Camp Questers are in relation to others in the United States while also constituting a method of adjusting to the country they live in.

If the people at Camp Quest are developing and expressing beliefs along spiritual lines, then one important feature to analyze is the way that they conceptualize the difference between themselves and religious Americans. The details of how and why the campers make this distinction are important as they point to fissures between religious Americans and non-religious Americans. We can derive from these spiritual beliefs that the Camp Questers think of religion as being fearful, out of religious Americans' need to believe in an afterlife, dogmatic, because of their certainty based on what the Camp Questers view as little to no evidence, and shallow, or closed off from the deep wonder of the universe because they are portrayed as learning all they need from religious sources. The important point to remember is that these are conceptual distinctions rather than real distinctions. I am not saying that there are no real differences between the two sides, but the Camp Questers *understand* there to be a difference and have made

that difference important to their sense of self and personal narratives. The difference, according to the people at Camp Quest, is in the details and those details allow the Camp Questers to differentiate themselves from religious Americans while still accessing an expression of American spirituality, a spirituality that has deep roots in the United States. This particular instance where people are identifying themselves as having spiritual beliefs, while also maintaining the explicitly non-religious nature of those beliefs through links to scientific knowledge, expose the ‘moral boundary work’ that these campers are engaged in (Ammerman 2013, 258).

Though the beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana share a resemblance to those that developed during the 1800s and 1900s, and they may even have a connection to those spiritual expressions, we must resist assuming an unbroken, or even jagged line extending from the beliefs at Camp Quest to those historical movements. Instead, the beliefs at Camp Quest are situated and reflect a current and contextually dependent socially constructed narrative that can be examined to learn about the Americans being studied. Discussions regarding spirituality often paint spiritual expressions as being fairly indiscriminately drawn from whatever vast cultural resources are available at the time, but this is misleading. Instead, I argue that the beliefs and their spiritual nature found at Camp Quest Montana are developed as part of a strategic, but spontaneous or implicit, reaction to the environment in which they live (Ammerman 2013, 265), one that is permeated and dominated by religious discourse. The ways that they choose to express themselves are vitally important and they are used to create an important narrative. This narrative is dynamic and emotionally charged because it creates personal markers (Day 2009, 268) and it has real meaning to the lives of the people at camp. Relating beliefs that contain a

spiritual element borrows the historic meaning of the spiritual in that it is a critique of the religion that exists, or is thought to exist, and a simultaneous production of an alternative.

So how do the Camp Questers define their own beliefs against those held by religious Americans? According to the people at Camp Quest Montana, the most important distinction between religious beliefs and the beliefs found at Camp Quest was the role that science played in developing said beliefs. It was clear from the science presentation mentioned at the beginning of this chapter that Jed wanted the children at Camp Quest to explain things and think of the world in as scientific a way as possible. This emphasis meant that the Camp Questers conceptualized their beliefs as being derived from scientific inquiry rather than what they thought of as the non-empirical authority of religion. According to the people at camp, both scientific theories and religions presented understandings of the world. Jed stated that both try to answer questions like “Who are we? Why are we here? And Where did we come from?” Each produces some explanation of reality, but the campers understand the difference to be that science involves theories where religion has myth. To the campers that meant that scientific theories are testable and therefore have some higher inherent value or provide a more realistic understanding, over un-testable religious mythologies. Josh, when asked what the difference was between his beliefs and religious beliefs said that his beliefs had ‘depth’ because they were developed by taking a look at ‘history and predicting, while [religious people are] looking at a story book’ and Susan followed this up by saying her beliefs were based on ‘proven facts.’ However, Brian pointed out that he understood both forms of belief were ‘still theories though, like the Big Bang.’ Building upon Brian’s statement, Josh said that he thought ‘one has scientific method and one has stuff behind it that is refutable’ and Brian agreed that when talking about scientific theories ‘facts can back it up’ while religious understandings of the world appeal to ‘just random “God.”’ However,

the tendency of the Camp Questers to reject certainty in almost all forms reared up when Toby cautioned the group that it is '[e]asy to make science into a religion by being too certain about a theory.'

The campers' differentiation of what they consider to be their scientifically derived beliefs from religious beliefs exposes avenues to better understand what is going on when non-religious people feel that they need to communicate beliefs that have a spiritual element. I must tread carefully as it is important to note that how the Camp Questers are defining themselves in relation to religion is not necessarily an accurate description of the religion being practiced in the United States. Often, when people define themselves in relation to religion, the "religion" that is 'being rejected turns out to be quite unlike the religion being practiced and described by those affiliated with religious institutions,' and the alternative of spirituality 'is at least as widely practiced by those same religious people as it is by the people drawing a moral boundary against them' (Ammerman 2013, 275). In other words, the beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana and the spirituality that exists therein, are reactions based on a *perception* of the way religions and religious people operate in the United States as well as a *perception* of how their spirituality differs from that of religions and religious spirituality. Their perception of religion as dogmatic, rigid, disrespectful of individual and group differences, human centered, and based on faulty evidence has led them to create for themselves a non-religious belief narrative from out of the contextual spiritual resources that American society and culture provide. Therefore, their beliefs contain a scientifically based anti-authoritarian emphasis, respect for the individual, respect for the environment, toleration of others, and are open to change.

They are reacting to the situation created through the diverse and shifting, but also overwhelming, influence of religion in their country throughout its entire history and finding a

way to adjust to the ‘social contexts, expectations and aspirations’ that they face everyday (Day 2010, 26). The important issue here is not that there are many religious people who would whole-heartedly agree with the spirituality and beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana. The important thing to focus on is that the people at Camp Quest Montana think of themselves and *act as if* there is a difference and they are using that difference as the boundary between themselves and others to create a sense of identity.

## **8. Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the importance of a spiritual content to the beliefs found at Camp Quest Montana. Using the campers’ own words, I have shown how the campers derived their sense of the spiritual from an understanding of science that imparted feelings of connection to the universe, the environment, and each other. I argue that even though beliefs are a contentious concept in academic analysis because their use makes researchers prone to misunderstand phenomena at best or, at worst, misrepresent phenomena, the explicit use by the Camp Questers and the centrality of their expressions of beliefs to their self-understanding make its inclusion a necessity. The expression of spiritual beliefs, however, is only the beginning of an analysis into what their use means for the people at Camp Quest Montana. The creation of the Camp Questers’ beliefs through a foundation in scientific understanding is the focal point of their perceived differences between themselves and religious Americans. Using their understanding of the differences between their version of spirituality and that of religious Americans, the Camp Questers are challenging the boundaries that have been erected in the United States that favour religious belief. By forming beliefs that emphasize the interconnectedness of all life, and indeed all matter, which is translated into a respect for all people, a desire to protect the environment,

and a rejection of certainty, these beliefs also criticize the nature of religious expressions found in the United States and create a new space for themselves within this religious country. This chapter dealt with the tools that the people at Camp Quest were using in the making and breaking of boundaries and in the next chapter I show what we can learn when the young Camp Questers act in the world to enforce those newly visible boundaries.

## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **AMERICAN IDENTITY, ADULT VS. YOUTH EXPRESSIONS OF NON-RELIGION, AND THE QUESTION OF RELIGION'S BENEFITS**

In Chapter Two I presented the potential reasons for why the camp Questers began expressing themselves through belief language. The previous chapter described the beliefs themselves and how they fit into the development of American spirituality. I also argued that the spiritual content of these beliefs is used to break down existing barriers while simultaneously set the Camp Questers apart from religious Americans. This chapter presents and analyzes the different ways that these beliefs are put into practice through everyday interaction with other Americans. Of particular importance are the differences in perceived and actual tensions that are experienced by the teenage campers and their parents. Through this discussion two avenues of analysis are possible. The first is that the data from Camp Quest presents a challenge to current theories that posit religion to be particularly beneficial for young Americans. This chapter argues that research regarding the benefits of religion for American youth misses the point by assuming some form of inherent religious element to full socialization in American culture. The second, using a discussion of identity, analyses the specific tensions experienced between Camp Questers and their religious peers to shed new light on how American identity is constructed, negotiated, and maintained. These tensions between the Camp Questers and religious Americans are presented as a form of identity construction and expression that challenges conceptualizations about non-religious Americans while simultaneously enforcing an American normative identity. Through these interactions the Camp Questers create space in which non-religious Americans can claim membership in the larger American culture. The analysis here does not delve into a

macro-level investigation that involves concepts like modernity, post-modernity, or secularization. Instead, the lived experiences of the campers provide an on-the-ground look at how these non-religious people are engaging and being part of a dialogue about the nature of America's identity and their place within it.

The parents at Camp Quest Montana grew up and spent most of their adult lives in contexts where their family, local, and national environments saw non-religion as being somehow abnormal. Their split from the religions of their respective families caused immense amounts of stress between themselves and their families (cf. Zuckerman 2011, 172). This meant that they have tended to keep their non-religion to themselves and resulted in an agonizingly slow development of the tools, like expressions of beliefs, that can be used to express their non-religion. With little to no support structures in place to help the adults generate their sense of non-religious identity, the process has taken years. The parents at Camp Quest Montana did not want their children to have to experience this same prolonged process and wanted to give them confidence to be themselves in public. That has caused them to develop a parenting strategy that is supportive of any choices that their children make, while also showing the children the value of meaningful beliefs derived from spiritual feelings of connection to the universe. A feature of this support is the parents encouraging their children, through activities like Camp Quest that provide the tools the parents never had, to be open about their non-religion and engage with other non-religious or religious people. The openness that has become part of the youth identity of the teenagers at Camp Quest Montana has caused them to challenge religious expressions of intolerance. They find that this intolerance is mostly directed at LGBTQ Americans, and their open challenge of these expressions are part of a complex process that points to their

internalization of a wider American identity as well as their willingness to enforce that same identity.

The following presents theories that show identity, particularly how this concept relates to youth, to be a contextually dependent and shifting multi-directional relationship between a person's idea of self and the cultural environment in which they live. Studying the identities of youths, when not thought of as being simple mirrors of the identities of their parents, shows the different ways that cultural pressures and resources can be deployed based on lived experience. Youth live in different times than their parents and those differences have informed a different expression and conceptualization of self for the teenagers than those of their parents.

### **1. Identity: Fluid, Constructed, and Contextual**

The academic uses and conceptualizations of youth and identity were both developed into their current recognizable uses during the 1950s, though they were in the academic consciousness in the late nineteenth century (Lemert 2011, 9). Also, each involves the dynamic and complex interaction of a person with their unique and shifting contexts. Both concepts came to the fore at a time when the Western world was itself going through a bit of an identity crisis. The Second World War had just ended, leaving behind a booming population that was more urban and better off financially than any before it. In his 1903 essay "The Metropolis and Mental Life" regarding identity, George Simmel wrote:

The deepest problems of modern life flow from the attempt of the individual to maintain the independence and individuality of his existence against the sovereign powers of society, against the weight of the historical heritage and the external cultural and technique of life (qtd. in Lemert 2011, 9).

This passage reflects upon a time that saw society moving from a simpler traditional agrarian existence to that of a modern industrial and urban life, with all the problems that that transition implied (Lemert 2011, 9). These transitions had happened before in human history, but the changes wrought in this particular time gained prominence in academic discussion under the conceptual umbrellas of “youth” and “identity.”

Simmel’s quote above points out that identity can be conceptualized as an ongoing negotiation between the individual and the cultural or societal context within which they move. George Herbert Mead, developing what would be thought of as Symbolic Interactionism, thought of identity as the self engaging through interior dialogue with the “I” and the “Me.” The “I” in this case being the internal self while the “Me” was the social self, reminiscent of William James’ work, where the two parts of the individual engage in a never ending and dynamic process (Lemert 2011, 11; Madge et al. 2014, 10). Along with the internal dialogue of an individual, the concept of identity relates to who belongs to what social groups. In other words, identity determines who a person is and who that person is not (Madge et al. 2014, 10). Investigating identity also helps us to understand that people do not have one static identity. Instead, they have multiple identities that have particular salience depending on context and setting because identity is an ever-evolving response to experience (Madge et al. 2014, 10). Most importantly, following the work of Erving Goffman, identity can be used as an indicator of how people adapt in order to belong, or, conversely, challenge the dominant labels and norms within a society (Madge et al. 2014, 11).

The use of identity in the social sciences is relatively new as the term only gained popularity in the 1950s (Gleason 1983, 910) and was largely used in a psychological sense. This new perspective on an old term, emerging out of the turmoil of World War Two, highlighted ‘the

individual's social locations and psychological crises in an increasingly uncertain world' (Asad 2003, location 2527). As people in the second half of the twentieth century came to grips with the chaos and mass destruction that the first half had wrought, identity became a way for social scientists to understand the new dialogues that were going on between the individual and a drastically changed society. Studies involving identity encouraged investigation of how individual personalities and the ensemble of social and cultural features interacted to give different groups their distinctive character (Gleason 1983, 926). It may seem quite obvious that an individual is influenced by their respective culture (Schachter 2005, 378), but the analysis of identity elaborated and expanded on that simple assertion.

Identity is a difficult concept to grasp fully because it indicates an ongoing process rather than a single state that involved interactions located '*in the core of the individual*' while also being located in the core of that person's communal culture in a two way and perpetual process that established the identity of both (Erikson 1959, 22 emphasis in original) in a form of implicit mutual contract (Hammack 2006, 325). Identity is, in essence, the inner self that holds some version of solidarity with the ideals of the larger culture, and all that that solidarity implies (Hammack 2006, 325). It follows from this that the individual and their surrounding cultural context are not easily separated because their interactions are so interconnected and mutually constitutive (Schachter 2005, 377).

Creation of a person's identity is not a simple choice between a number of culturally provided options. Instead, it can be thought of as a shifting configuration of many elements that contextually define and express the individual and their relationship to the world around them and this configuration is goal-oriented (Schachter 2005, 375, 382). This means that the formation of a person's or a culture's identity is a creative process where different cultural resources are

implemented in order to best meet the needs and goals of each in that particular time and place (Schachter 2005, 383). It is not inevitable, assumed, or predestined that a person will end up with one identity or another, but

rather than conceiving of the singular goal of identity formation as an individual's sense of sameness and continuity and commitment, identity formation is better described as the ongoing attempt to create a reasonably workable identity configuration. By *workable*, I mean the configuration is a tentatively plausible construction of prior identifications, allowing for the pursuit of valued goals, negotiated intrapsychically and interpersonally (Schachter 2005, 391, emphasis in original).

This is a complex formulation of identity, because it focuses on the interactions between an individual and their context, equal parts of the equation that are not easily or clearly known. This conceptualization becomes even more complex when applied to young people who are particularly sensitive to the often-conflicting social and cultural pressures that they are exposed to.

## **2. Youth: A Young Category for Young People**

Youth, much like every other concept in this thesis, is an incredibly difficult concept to define. It has a sense of vagueness to it that is not easily placed into a defined age range or life stage. However, aside from the difficulty in defining exactly what youth are, the fact remains that the young people who were at Camp Quest and who are discussed in this chapter were between the ages of 14 and 17 at the time this study was undertaken. Current studies in youth show that these individuals should not be thought of as incomplete adults, or people who have no voice of their own. On the contrary, the young people found at Camp Quest Montana had a definite sense of self, perhaps one that they were not yet completely comfortable expressing, but nevertheless one that affected how they experienced the world around them. The ways that these young

people, however we conceptualize them, navigate their lives as they age from fourteen-year-old people to eighteen-year-old people has been of increasing interest to social-scientific researchers in the twenty-first century, particularly how this group engages with religion and spirituality (Cusack 2011, 409). Within this academic discussion Carole Cusack has noted three trends, which are:

first, there has been a shift away from focusing on the formal processes of young people's religious socialization and a realization that youth exercise considerable agency in their construction of personal and group identities; second, the 1970s and 1980s assumption that religion was in decline in developed countries and was of little interest to young adults has been challenged by the growth of trans-national religions including Pentecostal Christianity, and by the emergence of a myriad spiritualities and identity-conferring subcultural groups including Paganism, Satanism, Goth culture and vampirism; and third, there is an increased acceptance that youth is less a uniform stage that all human beings undergo, and is more intimately connected to the specific historical, geographical, economic, and social context in which it is experienced (Cusack 2011, 409).

Most important is Cusack's first trend that identifies how youth are increasingly being thought of as actors in their own right rather than passive enactors of their parents' views or mirrors of the culture around them (Collins-Mayo and Rankin 2010, 193).

Throughout this chapter, and in earlier chapters of this thesis, these young people have been called 'teenagers,' but the 'teenager' as an actual term did not come into being until the boom times of the 1950s when young Americans were going to school for longer periods and were starting to develop significant purchasing power (Lemert 2011, 16; see also Cusack 2011). The category of teenager was a social construction but it resulted in the conceptualization of a whole new period of development in young Americans. This categorization had distinct problems that were indicative of a larger issue in the conceptualization of the progression from childhood to adulthood. In its early uses, the term teenager was used to argue that as children

transitioned into adulthood they were actually following the stages of development that human civilization progressed through. This was called the ‘recapitulation theory’ because a teenager and their activities were thought to replicate the “savage” stage of human development because they were tumultuous and transformational, but as they developed this would lead them into adulthood, or, following this theory, the “age of civilization” (Cusack 2011, 410).

The idea that as young people matured they mirrored the then popular conception of human progress eventually fell out of favour, but whatever common physical changes young people undergo from the ages of 14-18, they are also undergoing significant social and mental transformations and this experience, regardless of the culture within which it occurs, is mediated by that context (Hammack 2006, 324), just as a person’s identity is also mediated by the culture in which they live. The mediated nature of youth translates into potentially different experiences between young people and their parents, particularly when there is social upheaval like that experienced by the United States in the 1950s and 1960s. For young people in the first half of twentieth century America, it was common practice for them to be socialized into the religion of their parents, but even if they wanted to move away from that tradition the options were limited to a range of mainline Christian denominations (Cusack 2011, 411). However, the cultural and social turmoil in the United States in the latter half of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, opened up new avenues for expression among young people (Heelas 2008, 48). These new potentialities have resulted in Americans, particularly young Americans, being able to explore previously inconceivable options for their religious, or non-religious choices.

From the above discussion of youth, it follows that my focus should be interpreting the expressions and identities of young people as actors in their own right that navigate their cultural contexts in various ways and in various degrees, rather than just mirror those contexts or, worse

yet, ascribe some form of rebellious tendency upon all young people. When viewed this way, the expressions and actions of the young people at Camp Quest Montana can illuminate a part of the diverse experiences of non-religious Americans. Studying the youths and their parents, as I do in this chapter, is particularly important because, statistically at least, the ways that children are raised has ‘an enormous impact on their subsequent propensity to identify with a religion’ (Voas and Crockett 2005, 19), or in this case, non-religion. The influence of the parents is only one factor in how the teenagers view themselves and act in the world and it is in these teenage years when they start to make decisions regarding who they want to be and how they want to act. This is not a simple transcribing of the adults’ views on their children, but instead is a complex process. When discussing the very young, the child may have no choice but to adopt their parents’ views, but as they grow older they can change or even re-appropriate those same views and inheritances and make them into something new (Miller and Dixon-Roman 2011, 93). In other words, a young person can use the narratives that parents provide, but they can shift these narratives and this shift will be an artefact of the context in which they live, a context that differs from the years their parents spent as young people, thus orienting a young person’s self-narrative into their particular context (Hammack 2006, 327).

### **3. The Study of Identity in Non-religious Youth**

The study of youth and identity is dominated by perspectives that research how religion affects the development of young people, but very little research has been done towards analyzing youth who are non-religious, or how their non-religion affects them. The closest work has involved university students (for example see Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997; Cotter 2011), but this stage of life may be too late to understand the formation of a non-religious identity in

many individuals, and may have missed the period in a person's life when the very expressions sought have already stabilized (Voas and Crockett 2005, 19). There is some agreement that the middle- to late-teen years are central to the development of non-religion in young people.

Altemeyer and Hunsberger, in their 1997 book *Amazing Apostates*, found that non-religious people in university who had abandoned the religion of their parents, much like the parents at Camp Quest, had begun to wonder if religion had any relevance to them as early as age three, but most of the university students included in their study began to question their family's religion between the ages of twelve and fourteen (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 4, 13). These individuals reported that, on average, they had fully 'broken with their home religions, in their minds, at age 15.9' (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 113). Altemeyer and Hunsberger found that this period of life was one where individuals began to question many things, religion being just one of them, but their interaction with religion took a particular shape. According to Altemeyer and Hunsberger, as these non-religious people began to interrogate their religious traditions, their beliefs came apart 'brick by brick, until finally the whole design came crashing down' (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 211). The teen years were so important for those they studied, that Altemeyer and Hunsberger concluded that '(Mid)adolescence, more than any other age in life, appears to be the crucible for future religious belief, although final decisions are often not made for years' (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 58). These accounts and their findings from university students match closely with those of the parents found at Camp Quest, but tell us little about the experience of the children, particularly the older children, at camp that grew up with parents who were openly non-religious. This area of research has been understudied in scholarly literature on non-religious youths, perhaps because it has been overshadowed by studies on youth and religion.

#### **4. The Elephant in the Room: Christian Smith, the NSYR, and the Benefits of Religion**

Studying non-religious youth is particularly important because current thought regarding youth in the United States suggests that religion has beneficial effects on the lives of young people. One of the most eminent voices in this discussion is Christian Smith and the research being done by the National Study of Youth and Religion (NSYR). From research focusing on Americans that were between the ages of 13-17 years old at the time of the study's beginning (Smith and Snell 2009, location 59), Smith and his team conclude that religion in the United States is the dominant way for Americans to learn how to become good, upstanding, productive, well-adjusted members of U.S. society (Smith 2003a, 17). A member of the NSYR team, Patricia Snell, summarizing the study's findings as well as Smith's theories regarding those findings, states that religions provide young people with moral orders, learned competencies, and strong social and organizational ties (Snell 2009, 573). Moral orders are understood in Smith's theory as being when

American religions promote specific cultural moral directives of self-control and personal virtue grounded in the authority of long historical traditions and narratives, into which members are inducted, such that youth may internalize these moral orders and use them to guide their life choices and moral commitments (Smith 2003a, 20; see also Snell 2009, 573).

For Smith and the NSYR, learned competencies are the skills and knowledge gained through participation in religious organizations that provide leadership opportunities, coping skills, and social capital (Snell 2009, 573). The final aspect of religion that the NSYR found to be beneficial, social and organizational ties, was conceptualized as the 'relationships that youth acquire as they participate in religious activities, especially transgenerational ties to adults' that provide social support (Snell 2009, 573). In *Souls in Transition*, Smith and Snell state that these features of religion are beneficial for youths in the United States and 'can be expected to enhance their life

experiences' (Smith and Snell 2009, location 5915). These sentiments can also be found in Smith's article written with Robert Faris that found that not only did religion create benefits for a young person's state of mind, but religion was also 'positively related to participation in constructive youth *activities*' (2002, 7, my emphasis). These works contend that all of the above-mentioned factors make religion particularly capable of inculcating young people in the United States with a sense of 'individualism, pluralism, and choice,' which is emphasized in the larger U.S. identity (Smith 2003a, 20).

Smith's main conclusion is that young people in the United States, regardless of their religious identification are actually practicing what he calls 'Moralistic Therapeutic Deism' or MTD which Smith describes as a belief system that

consists of a god who created and orders the world, watching over human life on earth. This god wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, but does not need to be particularly involved in their lives, except when he is needed to resolve a problem (Smith 2010, 41).

This is akin to the vague sense of religiosity that was discussed in Chapter Two. Smith posits that the development of MTD has caused young Americans to become tolerant and accepting of each other because of this watchful, benevolent, but also distant, sense of god. This does, however, leave us to answer the question of where does this leave young people in the United States who have no religion, especially those that explicitly do not believe in a god, thus not fitting into Smith's MTD category, and what can we learn about the youth experience of Americans from studying this group?

Smith and the NSYR team's work involves young people who are not religious, but they do not reference any academic work on non-religion. Instead, Smith generalizes about non-religion, using the term "irreligion" based on his data set. This is not necessarily a complete

failing of Smith's work, but it limits his ability to capture the nuance in what is going on when a person is categorized as non-religious, or what they themselves think when they identify as not having any religious identification. Smith and Snell claim that

[i]rreligious emerging adults hold sceptical attitudes about and make critical arguments against religion generally, rejecting the idea of personal faith. They may concede that religion is functionally good for some people, but their general attitude is incredulous, derogatory, and antagonistic. Many Irreligious have paid some attention to intellectual and existential questions about religion and have already decided against religion and faith in favor of some version of secularism. Some are angry toward religion, others are simply mystified that anyone could believe or have any interest in things religious. Most were raised in nonreligious families or are ex-believers of some faith in which they were raised; emerging adults who identify as atheists or agnostics generally fall into this type. If they had an identifying motto, it would be "Religion just makes no sense." Irreligious emerging adults are small in number, comprising no more than 10 percent of the whole (Smith and Snell 2009, location 3601).

This description is representative of the range of expressions found at Camp Quest Montana, but Smith's conclusions regarding these non-religious individuals raise significant alarms. Smith's conceptualization of non-religious youth is quite troubling because he makes statements like '[c]learly, nonreligious youth are able to draw on coping mechanisms that are not obviously religious, such as "live and let live," "one day at a time," "they'll get theirs," "breathe," and "try to put things into perspective" (although many of these maxims in fact do ultimately have religious roots)' (Smith 2003a, 24). Smith goes on to say that for many Americans the idea that "nothing can separate you from the love of God" is somehow more profound and compelling than "it'll all work out in the end" (Smith 2003a, 24), a statement that is borderline offensive to non-religious Americans. These statements expose Smith's bias that prioritizes the benefits of religion while negating or ignoring any mechanisms that are not religiously based. Smith and the NSYR are painting a picture of non-religious Americans as being somehow less able to cope, or

more specifically, that they have a narrower and shallower toolset with which to deal with the trials of their daily lives.

Smith asserts that there is something inherent in religion that creates beneficial life outcomes in young Americans, which may be a factor in his dismissal of non-religious methods that could do the same for American youth. His approach gives extraordinary weight to the nature of religion and

assumes that there is something particularly *religious* in religion, which is not reducible to nonreligious explanations, and that these religious elements can exert “causal” influence in forming cultural practices and motivating action. For example, something particular about belief in a divine being or some distinctive element in the content of a particular religious moral tradition may produce some specific social outcome (Smith 2003a, 19-20, emphasis in original).

He continues by suggesting that ‘religion exerts pro-social influences in the lives of youth not by happenstance or generic social process, but precisely as an outcome of American religions’ particular theological, moral, and spiritual commitments’ (Smith 2003a, 20). For Smith, the primary way that religion is religious is through the spiritual experience because these experiences, and their intensity, solidify moral commitments and constructive life practices (Smith 2003a, 21). This kind of circular logic that places some kind of ineffable capability onto religion in America is counter to productive investigation into the lives of youth.

The troubling part of this discussion is that these ideas are not new. Religion has been recognized repeatedly as being particularly good at creating a sense of meaning and belonging in people (Davenport 1991, 2). It has been claimed that part of religions’ ability to provide these benefits are the deep sets of philosophies that come pre-packaged in a religious tradition (Davenport 1991, 4). The history of the Anthropology of Religion contains many of these references following the Durkheimian notion that religion can unite all people in an area in a

single moral community, acting as the glue of society (Swatos and Christiano 2000, 9). However, the benefits of identifying with a religious tradition are not a social fact, but should be thought of as a ‘largely unsubstantiated social-anthropological *belief*’ (Swatos and Christiano 2000, 10, emphasis in original).

The lack of any theoretical underpinning to Smith and Snell’s discussion of non-religion means that his conclusions about the utility of religion to the lives of youths in the United States should be challenged. It is not his research on youth, generally, that this chapter hopes to interrogate. His studies on youth are remarkable in scope and detail, but it is his application of that data to non-religious individuals that I question. Smith and the NSYR’s work is very good when considering the development of religious feelings in young Americans, but their conclusions become questionable when they expand that data to make broader conclusions about the benefits of religion and the causes thereof.

The rest of this chapter, in partial response to the findings of Smith and various co-authors, shows how Camp Quest is an example of one way that non-religious people in the United States are creating an experience for non-religious youth that creates the same beneficial effects as religious participation and belonging, without any religious component. From this discussion it is possible to add to the literature that does not assume religion to be the best way for a person to be a well-adjusted American, a supposition that perpetuates the stigma experienced by non-religious Americans.

## **5. Camp Quest Montana and an American Identity: A Response to Smith**

In order to examine the ways that the young people at Camp Quest Montana are creating, maintaining, and expressing the non-religious aspects of their identity I must clarify that I think

Smith and the NSYR are in fact arriving at the correct conclusions regarding American youth identity in general, while also, by focusing on religion, managing to miss the mark. For the most part, the study of the non-religious youths at Camp Quest Montana corroborates Smith and the NSYR's analyses of the general identities of American youths. The teenage Camp Questers show a remarkable tolerance of others including a general tolerance of religion, exhibiting no inherent hostility towards religion or religious individuals. They have come to imagine, borrowing a term from Benedict Anderson (1991, 7), the United States as a country where all people should and mostly achieve a prioritization of individualism, acceptance, and tolerance, particularly the freedom to make life decisions for oneself. The data gathered at Camp Quest Montana, however, contrasts with Smith's conclusions regarding the benefits of religion because it shows that the young people there are not wild hellions who are maladjusted, or somehow unhappy in life. I do not wish to negate all of Smith's research, or any other research that supposes religion to be *able* to have beneficial effects in young people. Smith may in fact be correct that religion has provided young Americans with the methods and means through which to become "good" and "happy" Americans, or that religion does provide young Americans with positive life benefits, but I do contend with his assertion that religion is *particularly situated* to do so. I admit that his analysis is nuanced in that it does not go so far as to say that religion is the only way for American youth to experience beneficial life outcomes. He and Snell state that there are

nonreligious emerging adults who are enjoying very positive outcomes in their lives, as well as highly religious ones who are greatly struggling. Nevertheless, big-picture analyses show that the overall tendency of stronger emerging adult religion to associate with particular patterns of life outcomes is real, quite consistent, and significant (Smith and Snell 2009, location 5862).

Smith's intentions are noble in that he seeks to 'enhance the quality of life of U.S. adolescents' (Smith and Faris 2002, 9), but if he seeks to do that, the solution must not be to ignore the ways

non-religious youth are already enhancing their own lives, nor to assume that there is something inherently special about religion that gives it such beneficial effects. Smith himself points out that the second largest group of young people (though Smith is discussing slightly older youths than those at Camp Quest Montana) are those who identify as not religious as they made up 27 percent of his sample (Smith and Snell 2009, location 2313) so their experiences should not be discarded in academic analysis. Also, these perspectives that focus on religion do not investigate how, if their conclusions are correct, non-religious youth gain the same benefits as their religious peers. The youths at Camp Quest Montana and their lived experiences point to a partial answer.

Challenging assumptions about the role that religion plays in the lives of American youths, particularly studying how young people navigate and negotiate their identities, is important because teenagers are at a stage in life where they are beginning to question the learned behaviours that their parents provided or exposed them to, and one of the goals of adolescence is to begin forming their own sense of themselves in relation to the larger world (Hammack 2006, 325). Teenagers, in particular are most often faced with either assimilating or repudiating their childhood identifications and creating something new out of a gradual integration of those past identifications (Schachter 2005, 382). The ways that the people at Camp Quest Montana, particularly the older children, have begun this process of integration, evident later in this chapter describing how they express themselves both at Camp and in everyday situations, points to the effects that activities like Camp Quest have had on the processes of identity formation. They have begun to form an internal narrative that helps define and situate them in the culture of the United States.

Based on the evidence from Camp Quest Montana, it is not religion that makes the young people at Camp Quest well adjusted. This would be illogical, as they have each explicitly stated

that they are not religious and have no interest in becoming religious. The people at Camp Quest Montana, however, do utilize expressions of belief, beliefs that are derived from a spiritual connection to the world and people around them. I do not seek to show that these expressions are simply a new form of religion, but I do argue that these phenomena actually represent the Camp Questers' use of prevalent aspects of American culture in order to claim their membership within that community. Their ability to express themselves through a language of beliefs is only one of the ways that the Camp Questers are creating their sense of self and managing to gain the benefits that Smith's research would deny to them.

Camp Quest Montana provides the young people who attended with the same resources that Smith and the NSYR team claim give religion such a beneficial status in the lives of American youth. Through experiences like those at Camp Quest the young people develop moral orders, learned competencies, as well as strong social and organizational ties, which all figure into their construction and expression of a non-religious identity narrative. The previous chapters showed how this narrative involves the expression of beliefs that are derived from a spiritual, but not religious, foundation, but these are not simply things that have been inscribed onto the young people at Camp Quest. Instead, they are achieved aspects of the young campers' lives (Roof 1999, 164). Their lives are given personal shape and meaning through the identity elements that experiences like Camp Quest provide because they help construct a non-religious narrative that is all their own (Hammack 2006, 326). Their parents gave them the tools with which to form this narrative, but the narrative itself is being imagined differently than that of the parents and it is that imagination shared through experience and discussion at Camp Quest that is enacted in the world by these non-religious young people.

Fostering belief language that is imbedded with spirituality provides both the adults and children at Camp Quest with resources with which they can interact in a religiously steeped American religious culture. These would be akin to Smith et al.'s moral orders and learned competencies. The spiritual beliefs that the Camp Questers develop are not derived from religious sources, but they do provide the campers with the foundations with which they have developed a strong sense of morality that is akin to that of most Americans, religious or otherwise. These young people have also been given strategies with which to engage other Americans their own age through the provision of a positive way of describing themselves, like the use of belief language. Through experiences like those at Camp Quest Montana they are learning how to express the morality that their beliefs provide while also learning how to communicate their sense of self to the wider culture.

The parents at Camp Quest did not want to force their children into any beliefs or behaviour and have tailored their parenting styles regarding religious belief in such a way that the children felt that they could, potentially, become religious should they want to. This mirrors one of Smith and Snell's conclusions that the creation of positive outcomes for young people involve the encouragement of 'religious socialization and the avoidance of relational breakdown' (Smith and Snell 2009, location 5056), minus the religious aspects. These two features of the parents' approach to introducing their children to other religions and other non-religious people are incredibly important as at this stage of life because the teenagers still have a remarkable plasticity and malleability to their identities (Hammack 2006, 359). The teenagers are at the same point in life where their parents created distance with their families over religious grounds and there is the real risk that the same could be repeated. The issue here is that for the people at Camp Quest Montana, the socialization is not religious, but the avoidance of relational

breakdown, an experience that the parents at Camp Quest know well from their experiences breaking away from their family's religion, is firmly part of their parenting strategies.

Perhaps one of the most important features observed at Camp Quest Montana, made possible by its family-oriented structure, was the supportive relationship of the parents to their children as well as providing new venues for interpersonal peer support. At Camp Quest, the young people were given the opportunity to meet and talk with other non-religious youth. Susan expressed how, before her experiences at Camp Quest Montana and at Camp Inquiry the year before, she had 'never been around that many freethinkers.' C.J. talked about how she felt better about her own self-identification as a freethinker because she knew now that 'more people are like me.' Another aspect of the interactions at Camp Quest Montana was the sense of a larger community outside of the camp's boundaries. Through discussions at camp, the teenagers learned about other non-religious Americans like Bill Nye The Science Guy, the Mythbusters Jamie Hyneman and Adam Savage, and of course Neil deGrasse Tyson. These were popular public individuals that the teenagers at Camp Quest Montana could identify with and look up to. Also, another important feature of the discussions and interactions at Camp Quest were that they did not have to center around religion. The young Camp Questers could just be themselves without any pressure to constantly proclaim a stance on religion or even declare their non-religion. They gained social support by interacting with people their own age, as well as adults or even older children and are a prime example of Smith et al.'s social and organizational ties, particularly as they apply to intergenerational and adult support.

Creating situations where the teenagers at Camp Quest could learn about and interact with other non-religious Americans is a key feature of activities like Camp Quest Montana. Non-religious people in the United States are a type of invisible minority so much so that a non-

religious person could be in a room filled with other non-religious people and never know. The invisibility of this group is compounded by the stigma that still surrounds expressions of non-religion as presented in Chapter Two. There are very few, if any, external markers that a person is not religious so activities like Camp Quest Montana add weight of numbers for a group that has tended to feel isolated. This realization has given the teenagers a confidence to openly express themselves where their parents experienced a kind of closeting in their teenage and young adult years. Being able to engage with others is a relatively new experience for those at Camp Quest Montana, beginning with the realization for the youths that they are not alone in the world, that there are other non-religious people who think like they do. They now have a sense of solidarity, allowing them to identify with the group's ideals, which are consistent with the ideals of a wider American identity (Hammack 2006, 360). In other words, they can synthesize their conception of self with their particular American social and cultural location (Hammack 2006, 325) rather than see themselves as alone against a potentially hostile, religious America. Camp Quest is a part of this process because it is an aspect of how the parents are teaching their children to live in a culturally religious America (Smith and Snell 2009, location 5020-5039). In fact, the socialization found at Camp Quest Montana is an example of Smith and Snell's findings about how most young people learn about their worlds and themselves and this is part of how members of society become 'inducted into the group' (Smith and Snell 2009, location 6076).

Camp Quest provides the adults and young people with a venue that is safe and supportive through which they can discuss their thoughts and experiences. That has led them to areas of similarity and the tentative ability to identify themselves as a loosely knit group, but a group nonetheless. Their ability to talk about themselves as Freethinkers is important because it is part of their self-definition and an important learned competency. Through defining

themselves they are able to express what it is that they feel sets them apart from the rest of America and work towards potentially bridging that gap. The ability to define oneself, for oneself, is part of a struggle to reclaim a past and create a future that may have been ‘misrepresented, silenced, muted, mutilated, or even obliterated’ (Farred 2000, 638) as a result of the culture of religion in the United States that is implicitly hostile to non-religious Americans. By naming themselves, they are able to challenge the public understanding of what and who they are, using a language of belief that accesses a shared spirituality, that allows them to experiment with new discourses that are more appropriate to their own self-definition (Farred 2000, 638).

## **6. The Development of a Youth Identity: Not Your Parents’ Non-religion!**

Camp Quest Montana was designed as a place that could help the children who attended navigate the world they live in. Through the expression of beliefs and the spiritual nature of those beliefs the adults were able to transmit the lessons learned through their own experience of life in the United States to their children. The children, however, do not necessarily enact those lessons in the non-camp environment, i.e. their everyday lives, in the same way that their parents do, or have in the past. It is here, in those differences, where the development, expression, and maintenance of the non-religious aspects of the teenage Camp Questers’ identities illuminate part of the lives of non-religious Americans (Mason et al. 2007, 151). This section focuses on presenting and expanding on the experiences that led the adults to attend, or create in the case of Abby and Liz, Camp Quest Montana with their children. This section also uses the teenagers’ own words to show how their experience of life in the United States differ from that of their parents.

Primarily, Camp Quest Montana was created and has grown in order to provide young people with a more fulfilling experience of a non-religious life than the one that their parents lived. The parents have tried to

more or less effectively transmit to [their] children... certain outlooks, meanings, values, and practices about different domains of life in the form of ideas believed, knowledge and skills acquired, and habits and lifestyles formed (Smith and Snell 2009, location 5020).

However, this transmission was not one-to-one and the differences come out of the particular contexts that each generation operates within.

The adults' experience of life was consistently related as one where, as teenagers or perhaps even younger, they decided that religion was not something that they were interested in. Rejecting religion and maintaining that rejection, often alone with little to no support structures became a source of stress for them and this stress, to varying degrees, continues today. During their own teen years they did not feel comfortable expressing their decision to give up or admit that they had never held religious beliefs to their families or peer groups. They felt that they needed to hide their non-religion, not for fear of persecution per se, but to avoid confrontations with parents, or siblings, resulting in their present tendency to remain closeted. Their rejection of religion caused a rift between themselves and their parents, a rift that for many still exists. They did not want this experience for their own children and Camp Quest has become a part of that goal.

The adults at Camp Quest Montana were, with Toby being the notable exception as he was of retirement age at the time of this study, born in the late 1960s or 1970s. This age group shows the most movement away from religion, relative to previous generations (Hout and Fischer 2002, 185). This makes sense because their parents, the grandparents of the young

people at Camp Quest Montana, lived in a time that stressed personal autonomy and the ‘questioning of traditional authority and norms’ (Cimino and Smith 2007, 414), even if, for most of them, that questioning did not affect their religious identification. Transitioning away from religion was a traumatic and daunting process for the adults at Camp Quest Montana, just as it is for many Americans that distance themselves from the religion that they were raised in (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 211). By rejecting the religion of their birth, they were potentially erecting barriers between themselves and other members of their families. They were, by denying one aspect of their families’ lives, choosing to be shunned or disowned, be separated from friends, or become complete social pariahs (Altemeyer 2010, 5; Smith and Snell 2009, location 2033). These tensions had a noticeable effect on the parents at Camp Quest. Liz felt ‘pretty much in the closet at home’ but liked talking about her non-religion with other non-religious people, though she admitted that the options were sparse where she lived. Abby felt guarded about identifying or expressing her non-religion. She had recently experienced a problem with her mother based on a Facebook post that Abby made indicating that she had joined the Godless Liberal Society. Abby told us how her mother had said ‘what a shame when there are so many positive associations that you could join.’ To this Abby said:

what makes you think that it’s not positive the fact that it’s liberal or the fact that it’s godless? And she spends 3 weeks going back and forth with me. I’m like, I don’t know what you’re talking about. Did you check out the society? Do you not like my politics, or is it that it’s Godless. And my mother picks a fight with me for 3 weeks!

The tensions between family members were not always so overt. James and Lily had built walls around the discussion entirely. James described himself as being ‘sort of at a truce with our family’ because several of his and Lily’s siblings were religious and they didn’t want their non-religion to interfere with Hermione getting to know and interact with her cousins.

The parents at Camp Quest also expressed difficulty in being open about their non-religion when interacting with people who were not family members, and this was dependant on where they were and to whom they were speaking. An incident occurred during a group outing to Glacier National Park that was intended to show the children the wonders of natural geography. This trip reinforced the incredible time scale of Earth's history and the way that simple, scientifically understood processes formed the physical world around them. At the very end of the trip, there was a fascinating incident that occurred as the group was leaving the visitor centre. While talking to a tourist about Glacier National Park, Abby, the organizer of the camp, was asked what kind of group we were. Abby stated that we were all there as part of a 'science camp.' However, when Liz heard this she stated that our group was an 'atheist camp.' As Liz said this, there was a palpable sense of embarrassment, or at the very least a certain guardedness from Abby. When I asked Abby about this incident during a group discussion, Abby stated that she was worried that to identify the camp as an "atheist" one would somehow affect her ability to live in Montana. She was worried that her neighbours or the larger community may view her differently if she was associated with an "atheist camp." This incident is also reflected in the previously mentioned use of the "I was raised Catholic" language that both Tom and Abby use when dealing with people whose opinion was important, people who, in these cases, are clients or neighbours. The interaction at Glacier National Park and the accounts by the parents of having to hide their non-religion has led them to feel separated from the bulk of American society.

These feelings were expressed by a general avoidance of the topic of non-religion or religion in public because it was thought to be the best way to avoid confrontation. Lily stated that she avoided discussing anyone's religion, but was most sensitive to it when interacting with Hermione's friends. She said that 'most of Hermione's friends are religious' and as a result Lily

said ‘we just don’t go there,’ much like the situation with her and James’ religious siblings. For the parents this is an option and for them this is all right as they have dealt with significant tensions with both their families and other religious Americans for most, if not all, of their adult lives. They have decided to live their lives knowing that their non-religion is a factor in this separation, but they do not want this existence for their children and as a result have developed an approach to parenting that is different than the one that they encountered with their parents, extended families, and peer groups.

As a result of their own experiences of tension with family members and other Americans, the parents at Camp Quest Montana have taken a different approach to how they interact with their children. This involves the development of parenting strategies that run directly counter to their experiences as non-religious youths, focusing on creating a supportive environment for their children and providing the tools for their children to engage with others and express their non-religion. They, like many other non-religious people in the United States (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 218), developed a perspective that would expose their children to religious material, but they would focus on critical thinking and encourage their children to think for themselves. That way, they hoped that as their children grew up they would be able to understand the different ways a person can be religious and why their parents had not made that choice. James explained his perspective and subsequent parenting approach by saying

I didn’t think about religion very much until Hermione was born. And then I started...then all of a sudden it became important to actually have a stance. Because as soon as Hermione was born...I have a job, my job is to teach this person how to take care of themselves. When she goes off into the world, at some point I want her to be like fully armed, ready to deal with anything that she encounters and then I can go like, die in peace. [...] I can defend her up to a point and then she’s got to defend herself. [...] I want to teach my kid the difference between right and wrong [...] and so how do I do that?

Becoming a parent was the pivotal moment in James' life that, in his mind, focused the importance of both his non-religion and the refinement of his thoughts regarding religion. He went on to say that his views about how he educates and socializes Hermione are

part of the protection thing. You want your kid to grow up and have a good life. [I don't want to] raise someone who at the end of their lives is like 'oh my gosh I have all these regrets. I have all these things I should have done. I should have cared more about this because you made bad decisions about what was important about what was right and what was wrong when you were younger.' I gotta set Hermione on the right path. If she goes veering off afterwards hey it's not my fault. But at least I pointed her in the right general direction.

Lily, James' wife and Hermione's mother, supported and added to James' statement when she said:

with us, until Hermione came along then it's okay to be separate from everything. We're adults and we're grown up but we're forming her basis of thinking. We're giving her information and having her digest it and think about it and it's important to be exposed to all of it I think. Not to the level of 'these are the sacraments and these are all the details about religions' but they're...where [religion is] coming from. To understand something if you don't know about it, you fear it. There's ignorance there and if you just hear a little bit of this guy and a little bit of that guy, that's important what people think, but it's one little slice. It's one person's take on it. If you look at what they...what the basis of their thoughts are, then you can form your own opinion.

This approach also included encouraging the children to be open in expressing their non-religion with others. Liz thought that she had to try harder to actually say what she believed and to be a visibly good person so that her non-religion would be an example to her children and to religious people. Abby, despite her identification as a 'science camp' at the National Park, agreed with this approach and said:

[y]ou can't be quiet because when you're quiet you allow the misconceptions to perpetuate and when you don't speak up you allow whatever's been said to percolate out there. So you have to say what you believe, you have to speak up, and you have to live by example and be a part of your community so I've taught them to be vocal about what they believe. And to just go ahead and speak up.

You don't ever have to feel guilty about what you believe, you don't ever have to stay quiet about what you believe because then you allow their misconceptions to go out there into the ether and perpetuate into the community. But I also don't think that's enough. It's not enough because there are so few of us.

Tammy was the only parent who was unable to attend the entire camp but her approach to parenting was similar to that of the other parents. Tammy encouraged her daughter C.J. to go to different churches to learn about the various ways that people could be religious. This was not an attempt to get her daughter to become religious, but instead was a way for Tammy to educate C.J. about the world around her. Tammy was not raised Catholic and stated that as a child she had also attended 'all churches.' She attributes this to her parents being agnostic regarding religion and has continued this trend with her own daughter. Interestingly, C.J. was the only child at Camp Quest who came from a mixed religious/non-religious household. Her father is a Catholic and this had caused tension between the parents. C.J. had developed most of her non-religion through interactions with her mother, and noted that her dad was 'more of a quiet person' who 'doesn't like to fight.' The fighting mentioned had to do with Tammy's reaction to his religious practices. Until quite recently C.J.'s father had attended church, often bringing C.J. with him, but C.J.'s mother told him to stop. C.J. commented that 'it was kind of rude of her to do that because he still believes in God.' C.J. characterised how going to church had affected her, with church being

just something fun to do. And then I started getting older and it bored me and I was just like 'why do people do this, none of it makes sense, it's boring. Why go through with it?' And then my mom started talking to me about it. When I was younger she would never talk about it because she wanted me to choose for myself. She started talking about it with me around fifth grade. But I never called myself an atheist or agnostic until seventh grade, so it was pretty new to me.

The fact that the parents encouraged their children to engage with religious practices and beliefs was an important aspect of their approach to parenting and a key factor in their attendance and participation in Camp Quest Montana.

One of the problems with encouraging your children to learn about religions is that this runs the risk that they may in fact decide to become religious. During a formal group discussion the parents all talked about how they would feel if this became a reality. This discussion illuminated an interesting feature of the parents' approach to educating their children about religion. When discussing how he would react if his daughter Hermione became religious James said:

[w]ell, I want Hermione to just use her brain and believe whatever she wants. If she has a...once she gets to be a teenager and...if she decides that she wants to be a Christian, that's okay with me. I am totally okay, as long as she's got reasons, if she says 'you know I thought about it and decided I think God exists' its like great, you thought about it, I just don't want her to go down that road without having, you know without realizing how big the universe is and how big the world is and how big the... whole spectrum of beliefs are.

Abby was intensely worried that her son Frank would become religious for what she viewed to be the wrong reasons. Frank, as you may remember, was one of the most vocal teenagers at the camp regarding his non-religion and liked to self-identify as an atheist to get a rise out of people. However, Abby talked about one incident where he had thrown away most of that identity for a girl. Of this incident, Abby said:

there was a brief period of time when, Frank will probably get mad at me for this, when he liked a girl, a believer of sorts of a strong sect of Christianity. I'll leave it at that. He got into a debate of sorts with her and because he liked her he quickly un-friended everyone that he was connected to with Camp [Inquiry] from last year because they were debating Christianity and atheism. [...] [Because of this girl] he knocked me out of Facebook and a couple kids from camp last year and this went on for a period of a month or two and because he liked the girl. I didn't like where this was going, and eventually he worked it out himself, [...] and quickly

re-friended everybody, but I was a little paralyzed with fear that his hormones and his like for this young lady were going to send him down a strange and crazy path.

These statements show that, often against their own better judgement, the parents at Camp Quest Montana were encouraging their children to engage with other religions so that they could make an informed choice about whether they wanted to pursue a religious life. For most of the parents, they were fairly certain that their children would not go down that path and that the teenagers would make the same choices that they themselves had.

Though the parents were mostly worried about their *teenage* children turning towards religion, the only occurrence of this happening was in the youngest members of Camp Quest, and even then only temporarily. Fred, along with his younger brother Barney, were the youngest children of Jed and Abby. They did almost everything together and were by far the most energetic children at Camp Quest Montana. Near the end of the camp I asked them what their favourite part of Camp Quest was and they simultaneously yelled ‘TUBING!’ This referred to going out on the lake and being towed behind the boat on a giant inflated tube, usually being flung off into the water at periodic intervals. They were enthusiastic and outgoing, which perhaps had something to do with Fred’s mother Abby saying that one day he proclaimed that he believed in Jesus. Abby told us all that she

was remembering a time that my youngest two, well all 4 of my kids...we’ve grown up alongside this Mormon family and there was this one time when Fred came home and said, ‘you know I believe in Jesus’ and I was like ‘excuse me?’ And he said ‘yeah we were talking [to their Mormon friend] and he said I believe in Jesus’ and I thought hmm. We didn’t get into it. I didn’t ask him to explain. And this went on for just about 3 months, where he didn’t clarify or explain his position and rather than argue with him, he’s 7 so we’ll just let it go and...he didn’t really explain himself. He had been spending a lot of time at their house and I figured whatever he heard, he heard and that’s fine. Perfectly entitled to belief in whatever you believe in. It went on for just this short period of time and one day he announced that he no longer believed in Jesus. Okey doke. That was the end of that.

This story about Fred speaks to how the parents at Camp Quest were supportive of their children's choices regarding religion. Because of their own experiences as young people, the parents at Camp Quest did not want to force their children into making any kind of choice that would cause a rift between themselves and their parents, friends, or peers.

Toby was the only outlier in regards to how he was choosing to raise his children and took a different approach to that of the other parents at Camp Quest. Toby's approach to parenting was one that was mostly indifferent to religion because he thought that his children would encounter religion on their own and if he had given them the right tools then they would agree with him that it was not a useful part of life. He noted that as a parent he was cognizant that 'we can worry about it too much,' with 'it' in this case being the draw that religion might have for their children. His approach was to provide his children with learning choices and let them go where they wanted. He said:

I ask them, 'do you want to read [the bible]?' and they say 'there's too many interesting things to read why would we bother with that?' That's the same thing as teaching them about religions. I'm so uninterested in religion that...why would I want to, I mean it's too boring to me.

He continued by saying he didn't feel he had to forcefully encourage his children to look into religion because 'its all out there. They know about the other beliefs. Maybe they talk to other kids, I don't know, but there's lots of things I could teach them.' Toby was the oldest parent at Camp Quest and he said that he would in fact be disappointed if his children became religious. He was torn regarding how he would feel about this and was particularly honest when he said that if his children became religious it would not 'mean that I didn't love them less, maybe it would, but I don't think it's a thing to worry about.'

The parents at Camp Quest Montana, had they never had children, would largely have been content to remain closeted, or at the very least just live their lives with little to no public interest in religion. With the births of their children, however, they became motivated by their desire to create a better world or at the very least show their children that there was a place in the world for them to be non-religious. The parents at Camp Quest did not want their children to feel the stresses of being separated from their families and friends because of their views about religion. As a result of this perspective and motivation, the children are much more open and engaged with their own non-religion as well as feeling free to express their non-religion with their religious or non-religious peers.

The young people at camp, particularly the teenagers, did not have the same feelings of separation from support structures that their parents experienced in their own teen years. They were, for the most part, engaging with religious Americans and being more open in expressing the non-religious aspects of their lives. For Frank, the fact that his parents were open to him being non-religious or perhaps even being religious made him say ‘[it feels] like I have support, whenever I need it.’ The teenage Camp Questers also did not feel much hesitation when discussing their non-religion with friends. When C.J. presented herself as not being religious to her friends, they often asked why? To which she said:

I just don’t believe it, and their like ‘oh okay, whatever.’ They don’t criticize me for it. They’re not like ‘well that’s stupid you should believe in God.’ They’re just like ‘whatever you want to believe.’

Perhaps the most open person was Josh. Josh’s ability to talk to other teenagers about both religion and his own non-religion caused Josh’s mother Liz to describe him as her ‘gateway’ by which she meant an advocate for living a non-religious life. She said that if people realize that he is not religious, but is nevertheless ‘kind and nice’ and ‘a really cool

kid' then they will change their opinions regarding non-religious people. Josh's openness did not mean that he did not have strong opinions about religion. Regarding religion, Josh said:

One thing I kind of have realized is that a lot of my reasons for not like being religious is that I really don't like religion. I'm kind of against religion. I find it ignorant in a way and I know that there are people who are really saved by religion and it makes them a better person, but sometimes I don't know if that outweighs the wars the killings, the fights, the...hate.

Josh mentioned that during an interaction with a friend, who he thought was religious, this friend actually expressed surprise that being non-religious was even an option and that, through talking with Josh, this same person expressed how he had, in fact, 'never really believed [religious teachings]' himself.

For the most part, the openness that the teenage Camp Questers exhibited in regards to their non-religion was met with acceptance and very little actual tension between the campers and their religious peers. The majority of interactions recounted by the young people at Camp Quest were not hostile or combative regarding religious people or their beliefs. Brian said that when he talked to his religious friends, he was not encouraging his friends to become non-religious. Instead, he was trying to be communicative about his own understanding of the world, a world that wasn't informed by religion, and leaving it at that. He described himself as:

I'm not like "all my friends have to be atheist, why do you believe this, this is stupid." I'm not trying to push anyone to be atheist or anything. I like informing other people [about myself].

By interacting with other American youths, be they religious or otherwise, the young people at Camp Quest have found that their peers, for the most part, exemplify Smith and Snell's depiction of American youth where they state that 'most emerging adults are happy with religion so long

as it is general and accepting of diversity but are uncomfortable if it is anything else' (Smith and Snell 2009, location 1921). The teenage Camp Questers reflect these findings and are accepting, tolerant, and emphasize individualism, even when talking to religious Americans. American teenagers, whether they are religious or non-religious, have been 'taught by multiple institutions to celebrate diversity, to be inclusive of difference, to overcome racial divides, to embrace multiculturalism, to avoid being narrowly judgmental toward others who are out of the ordinary' (Smith and Snell 2009, location 1903).

In contrast to the mostly amicable interactions experienced by Josh, Frank and Josh's younger brother Brian experienced interactions that presented less favourable reactions. Brian found that when he told people he was non-religious he was, ironically, usually met with disbelief. One of his friends had said that they thought Brian was joking. Frank was not afraid to interact with anyone regarding his non-religion and said that if anyone asks 'what do atheists believe' or 'where did the universe come from' he would 'go on a 30 minute discussion of the Big Bang.' He has an atheist friend who he talks to about 'whatever's going on in the world in regards to atheism and all that' but he also talked about his non-religion to his religious peers. Some of these interactions were favourable with people saying 'hey, that's cool. Believe whatever you want to believe.' Other interactions were not so positive with Frank saying that he had people call him a 'Satan worshipper,' which Frank said 'doesn't even make sense' and would reply that 'I don't even believe in Satan.' Frank was perhaps the most open about his being non-religious, but part of that interaction was to incite reactions rather than encourage a congenial discussion. This was most likely what led to Frank's increased levels of negative reactions to his non-religious identification.

## **7. Tensions Emerge: The Camp Questers' Responses to Particular Religious Expressions**

Despite the mostly open and friendly manner with which the teenage Camp Questers expressed their non-religion to both religious and non-religious peers, and the closeted approaches of the parents that hid much of their non-religion, there were notable accounts where interactions between the campers and religious Americans led to heated words uttered by the Camp Questers. These tensions, when they do emerge between the non-religious Camp Questers and religious Americans, are important because the particular incidents illuminate some of the key differences between the adults at Camp Quest and their teenage children.

The causes of these frictions reported at Camp Quest Montana have been noted in the academic literature on non-religion. For both the adults and the older children the areas where they encountered conflict with religion in general and religious Americans in particular were along similar lines to those found by Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997). Altemeyer and Hunsberger found that people who had left religion behind experienced tension with others in the areas of sex, proselytizing, and intolerance to either other religions or to other people (Altemeyer and Hunsberger 1997, 16). Taken as a whole, this accurately describes the interactions of the Camp Questers, but it is important to note which areas each age group emphasized. In order to provide a sense of how the parents and the teenagers at Camp Quest Montana interact differently with religious Americans, the following provides detailed accounts of antagonism between each age group with their respective peers, including the reactions and the reasons for said reactions.

The most important issues for the adults were religiously motivated challenges to the legalization of abortion and what they believed to be the religious foundations behind the degradation of scientific literacy in the United States, which includes the popularity of Creationism/Intelligent Design and restrictions on stem cell research. The legitimate potential for

Creationist or Intelligent Design textbooks to be made a part of the school curriculum was, for James who lives in Texas, the most important issue that led to agitation between himself and religious Americans. This is not an outlandish concern as Texas, and the southern United States in general, is incredibly influential in the format and content of textbooks because of its practice to have a unified policy regarding the purchase of textbooks for all its schools, a practice that flows directly up to the publishing level (Jacoby 2004, 234). Therefore, as goes Texas, so goes a large portion of the United States. When discussing this issue, James described himself as a ‘barricade atheist’ because he wanted to make sure that what he thought of as the separation of church and state was enforced. He elaborated by saying:

so that’s where the barricade atheist comes in, it’s like well I don’t know if I want to call myself an atheist and jump in with these atheists and everything, but they’re actively fighting the theocracy that [religious people are] trying to establish. I need to at least move over and stand with them. I’m with you guys. I’m not with those guys over there. It’s like we need to show Hermione [...] that these people over here will protect your rights better than those people over there. So we’re going this way for now and you know you can believe what you want, but having laws about what you believe and what religion you should have... we think that’s wrong and we think you should decide what’s right and wrong using your mind and have reasons for saying that that’s right and wrong than saying this is a rule in a book.

For the parents, their resistance to what they perceived as the spread of religious influence on issues of the law was a matter of an individual’s freedom. This perspective expanded into their motives behind protecting a woman’s right to have an abortion. A statement by Abby epitomized this feeling when she said:

I think everyone’s entitled to believe whatever is going on inside their mind but no-one has a right to force another person to bend to their will. I think when Liz and I were saying that where your rights end is when you start trying to shape the laws of my country. When you start trying to take your book and force it into my government and force it onto my body or force it onto the medical establishment or force it onto laws that are going to affect my medical treatment. That’s when your rights end, your right to believe what you believe. That’s when your rights end.

The adults, despite their expression of a live and let live attitude, became agitated when these issues came up, but their children exhibited similar reactions to a very different set of religious expressions.

For the teenagers at camp, the interactions with religious Americans that most disturbed them were when religious Americans expressed sentiments that the Camp Questers felt oppressed, marginalized, or ostracized others. The teenagers at Camp Quest became incensed when discussing how particular religions and religious people persecuted members of the LGBTQ community. Recounting an incident in science class where the issue of AIDS came up, Frank heard a classmate say ‘I don’t want there to be a cure for AIDS’ and when this person was asked by a friend ‘why not?’ Frank heard them say ‘oh it’s God’s plague on the gays.’ Frank then said that it was

sometimes very difficult to deal with that stuff in school. Sometimes someone says something and I just want to leap across the room and say ‘how can you be so cruel and ignorant?’

Frank, motivated by these feelings, recounted how he actually confronted his classmate by saying ‘are you kidding me? What happens when straight people get it? What happens then? What happens when babies are born with it?’ In another account, Josh described a friend of his, who is gay, and the problems that this friend was encountering simply because of his sexuality.

Describing the situation, Josh said:

I had a friend. He’s gay. He’s still kind of in the closet. He’s come out to a few friends but his parents are very religious and they kind of found out. He’s very, flaming, in a way, very flamboyant. So the first thing you notice is that this kid could definitely be gay. But his parents will have like sit-down talks and they will get mad at him. They will have their pastor come and have hour-long talks with him that he doesn’t want to do. He feels really bad. He feels like it is something that he has to hide. That would be terrible. So when I hear stuff like that it

frustrates me, it makes me mad and I'll go on rants with my friends. I've actually been told I'm wasting my time when I go on a rant cause like you can't do anything to stop it.

These reactions were indicative of what the teenagers at Camp Quest conceptualized as the negative side effects of religious beliefs. They often see these kinds of behaviours in other Americans and Josh wondered 'why would you do that to another human being?' The different areas of focus for each generation's reactions to religious expressions point to the differences that develop due to the mostly closeted way that the adults expressed their non-religion and the way that their children were much more open to non-religious expression. These differences have important consequences to the conceptualization of American identity and the tensions between religious and non-religious Americans.

## **8. An Explanation of Intergenerational Differences**

One of the primary findings from research done at Camp Quest Montana is that the non-religious teenagers there have started to figure out how they want to express themselves in the American public sphere. I argue in this section, based on the discussions above regarding the different character to the expressions of non-religion for the parents and the teenagers at Camp Quest, that the different processes that have informed the creation of an American identity in each generation is the cause of these differences. The parents try to enforce barriers because they have, for most of their lives, felt separate from religious Americans. The teenagers, on the other hand, have been given tools, through experiences like Camp Quest Montana, which encourages them to be confident in expressing their non-religious sense of self. The teenagers, because of this confidence, are better able to identify with the larger youth identity that is observed in results like those presented by Smith and the NSYR.

Historically, non-religious Americans have been marginalized in the United States and this has resulted in experiences by the Camp Questers where their peers assume that because of their non-religion they are somehow immoral anarchists who believe in nothing. This is a violent identification of non-religious Americans and it has gone on so long because the culture of religion is assumed rather than explicit. The most powerful groups in a country, in this case the vast majority of Americans who are religious, do not need to identify themselves because the world around them already accepts and acknowledges that group's power (Farred 2000, 642-643). This means that for much of its history, the religious majority in the United States has forced its negative perception onto non-religious people. This was evident in Chapter Two where I discussed how opinions in America regarding non-religious people were unflattering at best as well as the interactions of Tom and Abby where they had to identify themselves as having some form of Catholic roots. These everyday examples show how the culture of religion within the United States limits the expression of identity for non-religious people by placing subtle hints at the expected ways that they can conduct themselves and, in this case, identify themselves (Farred 2000, 643). This describes the experience of the parents at Camp Quest Montana, but this is not the case for the teenagers.

The data gathered from Camp Quest Montana points to new phenomena where young non-religious Americans are pushing back against that enforced naming and beginning to determine their own public identities. By utilizing spiritual beliefs as part of their non-religious identity, the people at Camp Quest Montana are identifying themselves, but are constrained by the type of identification made possible in the United States. Creating a new public identity is a complicated process because it is a balancing act between the creation of something that is unique with the desire to be accepted as part of the larger group (Farred 2000, 641). The

teenagers, by linking their identities to a spiritual belief system, are engaged in a dialogue with religious America (Farred 2000, 638) that had previously been vastly unequal, with non-religious Americans having little to no tools with which to negotiate their own public identities. The effects of this dialogue are evident in the teenagers because they are much more open about themselves where the parents hesitate to identify themselves as non-religious.

The parents and teenagers have different reactions to religions in the United States because the parents have had to develop a non-religious identity and the social tools to express that identity on their own, while also having to negotiate the very different familial and social pressures present in the America of their youth. Also, when the adults at Camp Quest were figuring out how to be non-religious, America was experiencing a time when evangelical Christians were becoming more and more vocal and simultaneously using that voice to be increasingly influential in American politics. This led to issues of morality, including sex and abortion being at the forefront of public dialogue during the adult Camp Questers lives. These issues lead to tension because they are trying to shore up the limits placed upon religion that they view as being a vital part of American life. The parents, mostly because of their closeted approach to their own non-religion, enact that identity when they feel religion to be encroaching onto their lives. They view any movement that enforces religious sensibilities as a violation of their rights and the rights of others. This reaction may be a vestige of the “Culture Wars” that developed in the last decades of the twentieth century that were characterized as a battle between religious and secular forces, particularly how this struggle was waged over reproductive and moral grounds. Their preference to hide or obscure their non-religion takes on an entrenched quality where they are happy to live their own lives but when they do express themselves it is to ensure no outside, i.e. religious, interference.

In contrast, the area where the teenagers experienced tension was when they perceived religious Americans to be intolerant of others based on religious principles. For the teenagers, their interactions turn aggressive when they feel religion is the reason for the *persecution* of another person or group rather than their parents' reaction when religion is thought to be *infringing* on American lives. The parents act out of a sense of protection, based on their feelings of otherness when their non-religion was developing, but the teenagers enact their non-religion as reflections of their internalized American youth identity, revealed in the research of Smith and the NSYR, and the contexts in which that identity was formed. In this case those contexts have encouraged young Americans to be tolerant and accepting, which informs the tensions that have developed between themselves and certain religious expressions.

Despite the tensions that the parents have experienced between themselves and their families and with religious Americans, through solitary experiences, they were able to develop a sense of self that involved spiritual beliefs. The teenagers are learning to use these same tools that their parents employ, but the difference is that the teenagers can integrate these tools into their sense of self without the familial strife that their parents experienced. This is largely a result of the parents' efforts to provide a fully functioning support structure that they themselves lacked. Also, their use of these tools and the expression that develops out of that use is different from that of their parents because the world these teenage campers live in is different than the America that their parents had to navigate.

The teenagers' responses to tensions expose how they are utilizing these features of their particular American youth identity, synthesizing them, and enforcing the expression of those same features in others. Through the same socialization processes that Smith and the NSYR found to create benefits in religious youths, the teenage Camp Questers have internalized and

assimilated an American emphasis on tolerance and individualism that views intolerance as abnormal. When looked at from this perspective, through the analytical lens of identity theory, this is actually evidence of the teenagers claiming acceptance and validity for their non-religious identities in the American social, cultural, and religious environment. The differences in social interaction and how each group dealt with the tensions therein aids in exploring the ways that the creation and maintenance of the non-religious aspects of the Camp Questers' identities affected their everyday lives. The teenagers at Camp Quests Montana are starting to integrate experiences like Camp Quest into articulations of non-religion that are more open and because of this are more likely to express their non-religion in everyday life. This leads to strained relations between themselves and religious Americans that are different and meaningful than those described by their parents.

The abovementioned incidents of tensions between the Camp Questers and religious Americans are evidence of the people at Camp Quest Montana deploying their sense of identity towards a particular end, that of exercising agency in a country where they have been historically marginalized (Farred 2000, 631). Much like the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, the expression of a non-religious identity that involves both beliefs and spirituality constitutes a minority population engaging with the wider culture. This engagement consists of resisting the labels and assumptions that the majority have placed on them, but also negotiating the limits of their own agency to shape that culture (Farred 2000, 638). The use of beliefs and spirituality are natural extensions of the culture of religion found in the United States, but the people at Camp Quest Montana have taken that culture and appropriated it as part of their own non-religious identities. These identities are employed in their resistance to the abovementioned expressions of religion.

Camp Quest Montana, and the social phenomena that it is representative of, is a window through which we can glimpse one of the ways that non-religious Americans are countering negative labels while simultaneously assimilating many of the features of the dominant culture. If, as I argued in Chapter Two, the United States has a culture of religion then the quest for a meaningful non-religious identity is nothing less than the quest for legitimacy (Hammack 2006, 328). The very problems that non-religious people have experienced in the United States are symptoms of their identities being excluded from what is considered normal and acceptable (Asad 2003, location 2536). In this sense, the creation of an identity that involves beliefs and spirituality is a form of resistance built out of the same materials provided by the culture of the United States (Cimino and Smith 2007, 420). Though they would not claim to be doing so, the people at Camp Quest Montana are engaged in a struggle over identity politics. From this perspective, the teenagers' reactions to the treatment of LGBTQ individuals, caused by what they understand to be religious beliefs, is akin to them claiming membership in the dominant culture. The berating of religious individuals is the Camp Questers' proclamation that they are Americans while also claiming that they are, in at least one way, better Americans than their religious peers who seek to oppress or stigmatize others.

It is of vital importance that the area where Camp Questers report a breakdown of their tolerance of others, oddly enough, is where they see religious Americans being intolerant. These experiences expose areas where the teenage campers see the shared liberalism of the United States, consisting of a predisposition towards individualism and pluralism, being contradicted. These actions, according to accounts from the Camp Questers above, amount to a violation of the American identity (Swatos 2010, 437) that they have assimilated and adopted through experiences like those found at Camp Quest Montana. Their response, therefore, can be

understood as one of competition. Expressing their identities, which the campers view as legitimate and reflective of the larger American identity, acts to challenge the validity of another identity, in this case a religious one that has negative views towards the LGBTQ community (Hammack 2006, 328). The strong reactions of the teenagers to statements made by religious Americans, despite their predominantly tolerant and accepting natures, are the fulcrum upon which the new aspects of a non-religious identity, partially formed by experiences like those at Camp Quest, act upon the world. Within these tensions lay the expressions of the internalized ideals, morals, competencies, and social support garnered through interaction with other non-religious individuals at places like Camp Quest Montana. Through conflicts with some religious Americans we find the expression of the identities that Camp Quest helped develop, and from that expression the identities of the young Camp Questers become enacted in the world. Their sense of difference is parleyed, through social action, into membership.

Expressing themselves to religious Americans is inherently dangerous as they open themselves up to being further marginalized, but that danger is lessened by the newfound ability of these young people to express positive and spiritual beliefs that undergird their actions. The public expressions of non-religion and the tensions with religious Americans are not empty debates (Asad 2003, location 2929). They have meaning because they are identities in action. Through the interactions discussed above regarding religious claims about the LGBTQ community and the increasing ability of the campers to be open about their non-religion, the Camp Questers are disrupting assumptions about non-religious people (Asad 2003, location 2929). This disruption is not intended to tear down the culture of religion in the United States. Instead, it is quite the opposite. These tensions, when understood in the context of expressions of belief and spirituality as elements of identity, are actually a way for the Camp Questers to widen

the possibilities for membership available to them within American culture. They have no wish to see religion fall away from people, creating some secular age that Richard Dawkins would approve of. Instead, they seek membership in a culture where the previously assumed and perhaps necessary criteria for entry is some form of religious identification and belief. The interesting part is that these actions fit well within Smith et al.'s conclusions regarding youth, but the young Camp Questers arrived there specifically without appeal or membership to religion.

Utilizing the above theoretical discussions regarding youth and identity and applying them to the examples found above recounting moments of tension between the young people at Camp Quest and their religious peers provides a more nuanced understanding of what it means to hold and express the non-religious aspects of a person's identity. Instead of taking Smith et al.'s view that religion is supremely adapted to creating beneficial outcomes in young Americans, the tensions between religious youths and the non-religious youths at Camp Quest show us that these interactions may be more about enforcing American norms that the non-religious youth interpret as being broken by intolerant statements. When religious people make statements against LGBTQ individuals they are placing that person in conflict with the normative identity of the communal culture (Gleason 1983, 914), a communal youth culture that is, as Smith et al. point out, predominantly tolerant of others. Placing people below consideration or denying any group membership in the tolerant milieu of the United States breaks the illusion of uniformity in the normalized identity of the United States. The young people at Camp Quest understand much of the intolerance to be religiously motivated so their negative reaction to the intolerance takes the form of a critique of religion, but more specifically, these incidents should be thought of as an act of resistance (Byers and Tastsoglou 2008, 8) to non-conforming expressions of identity. Encounters like these are examples of non-religious youths exerting normative pressure on their

religious peers, in this case, a pressure to conform to what they interpret to be a tolerant and accepting American identity.

As a result of their experience at Camp Quest and other non-religious camps, Camp Questers have had access to many of the positive effects that Smith states create the beneficial effects of religion in youths. This has resulted in them internalizing the normative American identity found throughout Smith's research and findings. The reaction of non-religious youths to intolerance is in fact part of a struggle to determine the legitimacy of an American identity that is threatened (Hammack 2006, 328) by acts of intolerance. From the accounts of this small group we can see these non-religious youths challenging religious people, not for their religion, but for their religious motivation for diverting from the American norm by being intolerant.

## **9. Conclusion**

The differences in how the adults and teenagers interact with other Americans points to the importance of context to the formation and expression of identity, and the tools available with which to express that identity. For each group the issues that they feel are important regarding religion take on a different character depending on their particular contexts. The parents grew up in a time when the live and let live attitude born of the 1960s was still developing. The youths, on the other hand, live in a world that has embraced the nascent feelings of equality that the civil rights and counterculture movement popularized. The teenagers live in a United States that, because of the social changes and ensuing chaos over the last fifty years, identify with the values of equality, independence, and tolerance. The parents had to hide their non-religion, which still causes problems for them, but their children are just starting to learn how they can be openly non-religious without massive discrimination. This newfound

engagement with their teenage peers is not without its disputes, but these tensions point to new areas of inquiry that illuminate the ways that non-religious young people are forming their own sense of self and expressing that self to the world around them. What the above analysis shows is that developing an identity that includes beliefs and a sense of spirituality may actually provide more benefits for non-religious Americans than approaches that aggressively push for America to be completely secularized (Cimino and Smith 2007, 423). The Camp Questers do not want to limit Americans' ability to be religious. They do, however, want to ensure that they can express their non-religion while simultaneously limiting religious Americans' ability to be intolerant towards others.

When we look at how these nonreligious youths are interacting with their religious peers, particularly where those interactions create tension, we see that they are acting in a way that can be easily reconciled with what Smith claims are the standards of what it means to be a good American, but these particular youths have managed this without high levels of religious identification or practice, in fact with no religious practice. This points to the possibility of a deficiency in Smith's theories regarding religion's effect on young people. It may be beneficial to study religion's effect on youth as simply one type of formative experience among many, rather than view religion as having a practical monopoly on the creation of positive life experiences. This chapter only speaks to the experiences of a very small group of non-religious youths, and in no way cripples Smith's analysis or conclusions, but even these limited accounts point to areas of further research into the intersections of youth, (non-)religion, and identity in the United States, one where the processes involved in socialization, religious or otherwise, and their effects on identity should be at the forefront.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### CONCLUSION

Ethnographic research at Camp Quest Montana provided fertile ground for the analysis of the forces involved in the development and expression of a non-religious American identity. My research takes a relational approach to non-religion and focuses on the lived nature of that non-religion: shedding new light on how non-religious people experience life in the United States. My priority was not to engage in a highly theoretical and abstract investigation. Instead, I wanted to emphasise the Camp Questers' own words and self-definitions that describe their lived experience. An incident occurred early on at Camp Quest Montana that illuminates the necessity of this kind of ethnographic research and the importance of studies like my own. On the first day, shortly after arriving at camp, I had a particularly telling experience that I am sure is familiar to many ethnographers. Meeting Toby for the first time, I introduced myself and told him that I was studying atheism in the United States. He immediately stopped me and said that he did not think of himself as an atheist. This was a valuable lesson to learn at the beginning of the ethnographic experience. I was using terms that my participants did not share, or did not reflect how they thought of themselves. I had temporarily forgotten the words of E. E. Evans-Pritchard when he states:

Obviously the most essential of all things the anthropologist must have in the conduct of his inquiries is a thorough knowledge of the language of the people about whom he is going to tell us. By no other path can their thought (which is what I have myself chiefly been interested in and why I have spent a lifetime in anthropology) be understood and presented (Evans-Pritchard 1976, 251).

Though I am a native English speaker and was doing work in the United States, I had temporarily forgotten a basic concept in anthropology and ethnography. In assuming that Toby

considered himself an atheist, I was, in essence, speaking a different language that did not reflect that of my participants and inflicting that language upon him. Toby's reminder reinforced that I was essentially an interloper in this experience and his correction helped me realize that I must quickly become receptive to the actual words being used. The non-religious people that I encountered at Camp Quest Montana have had to deal with this kind of misunderstanding for most of their lives, but research like this thesis can aid in understanding at least part of their experiences as non-religious people, on their own terms and using their own language.

Though I have tried to be as thorough as possible in presenting the experiences and expressions found at Camp Quest Montana, there is still much work to be done. The conclusions presented here are not easily generalizable, as the sample size was simply far too small to get any sense of American non-religion in general. That was not the intention of this work. Instead I have tried, in the preceding chapters, to use the words and actions of the individuals at Camp Quest Montana to show a glimpse of the many possible ways that people can be non-religious in the United States. This study could be expanded significantly to further this research. Fruitful areas of expansion would include regional comparisons, national comparisons, and even perhaps comparative research involving religious analogues to Camp Quest.

The first area ripe for further study would be to compare the activities and expressions found at other Camp Quests or other non-religious groups and events in the United States. This would provide richer comparisons to the general non-religious population of the United States. Also, the inclusion of other Camp Quests or other non-religious camps could expose regional variations. The United States is a huge country with a vast diversity of cultures and sub-cultures so this comparative work is vital to understanding the overall picture of non-religion in America. Expanding this study to the entirety of the United States could also reveal differences based on

race. The campers at Camp Quest Montana were all white, and their particular experiences of life in the United States may not be representative of the non-religion of visible minorities in America.

Taking an international perspective by studying camps (perhaps even Camp Quests) in other countries and comparing their particular experiences with those found in the United States (a project similar to that undertaken by Zuckerman who compared U.S. and Scandinavian non-religion) would be immensely valuable in exposing national differences between non-religious expressions in youth. If non-religion is truly a relational phenomenon and each instance of non-religion informs and forms its particular character in reference to the religious phenomena that it interacts with, then expanding the work done by this thesis to other countries is vital to understanding the wider international qualities of non-religion.

Another avenue for further study would be to investigate how experiences at religious camps compare to the results from Camp Quest Montana. The differences (or perhaps even similarities?) found at religious camps would add a fascinating view into these kind of purpose-built camps as well as the overall dialogue regarding religion and non-religion at these sites. There is every possibility that religious Americans may have the same feelings of being persecuted, despite the overall inclusiveness of America's culture of religion. That may colour how they organize their camps, what kind of activities are presented, who or what these camps view as the sources of their persecution, and the tools that they try to provide children that attend these religious camps. Studies of this nature could expose and analyse how religious camps and campers view and move through the religious cultural landscape in comparison to the Camp Questers. Comparative research of this nature could also further critique assertions of religion's importance for young Americans made by Smith and the NSYR.

Enlarging the time frame of this study could also provide helpful insights into how the younger children, moving into their teen years, may come to express their non-religion differently. The work presented in this thesis could be the first of a long-term series of interactions with the same group of people in order to map how their non-religion changes during the course of their lives. As the teenagers begin to enter university or the working world it would be useful to gain an understanding of how activities such as Camp Quest Montana figure into their lives as they move into adulthood, and what parenting choices they make as they have children of their own. Also, the teenage Camp Questers discussed in this thesis had some memory of going to church with their parents. For most of them it was years ago, but they were old enough to remember the experience and did not enjoy it. The youngest children at Camp Quest, however, will most likely not have these same memories. It is quite possible that they will grow up with Camp Quest Montana, along with other non-religious activities, as one of the formative memories of their childhoods. They may come to express their non-religion differently than their parents, or even their older siblings because they will never remember a time when religion had any vestigial hold on their lives.

The ethnographic accounts gathered over the course of my week at Camp Quest Montana show how these non-religious people were using a language of belief, informed by a spirituality derived from science, as part of an effort to fit themselves into the wider American culture of religion. The fact that most Americans identify, at least nominally, with some form of religion has placed pressures on the people at Camp Quest Montana to express some form of religious identification. It has also led to non-religious people being distrusted in the United States and thought of as somehow lacking in some ineffable moral fibre, in contrast to religious Americans. I argue that the Camp Questers express themselves through a language of “belief” because of the

current and historical pressures to be religious, along with Americans' innate distrust of non-religious people. Using "belief" language allows them to talk about themselves in a way that makes sense to religious Americans, while also maintaining a non-religious identification. For the Camp Questers, the use of a language of belief opens the door to inclusion in the United States.

An important finding of this thesis is how the Camp Questers use scientific principles and knowledge about the world to create a form of spirituality that informed the content of their beliefs. I should emphasize that the "spirituality" found at Camp Quest should not be haphazardly categorized as being an alternative form of religion. The people at camp clearly do not want to call themselves religious and we should resist the temptation to do otherwise. Deriving their sense of connection to each other from what they conceive of as scientific explanations of the universe is an important feature that sets them apart from religious Americans. Following the metaphor from above, if belief language was the way of opening the door to inclusion in American society, the spirituality that informs those beliefs is what allows the Camp Questers to walk through the door, kick off their shoes, and get reasonably comfortable.

The study of belief has been contentious in the study of religion. However, since the people at Camp Quest Montana are using *belief* to describe themselves, a description that is integral to their self-understanding, an analysis of how and why they are using that term is necessary. That analysis requires the use of the campers' own words to describe how and what they believe. The beliefs themselves are founded upon the ability of scientific study to evoke feelings of connection to each other and the universe through a shared chemical makeup and history. From this, the Camp Questers have come to believe in the compassionate treatment of all

living things, an emphasis on the importance of this life over any kind of afterlife, and a respect for the environment. Included in each of these beliefs is a commitment to reject all forms of certainty whether in scientific, religious, or non-religious matters.

Moreover, this study found that there are striking differences between how first and second-generation non-religious Americans (the parents and children at Camp Quest Montana) interact with religious Americans. These variations are important because they point to different experiences of the social and cultural landscape of the United States, differences that are reflected in each generation's non-religious expression. The adult campers had a tendency to remain closeted about their non-religion while their children were much more willing to openly live the non-religious aspects of their identities. The parents at Camp Quest had, for most of their lives, kept their non-religion hidden from public expression. These parents did not want their children to experience this kind of life where they were afraid or hesitant to express themselves. That caused them to develop approaches to parenting that encouraged their children to be expressive about their beliefs, while also provide the tools to do so. These strategies were so successful that the teenagers are engaging with religious Americans and even starting to challenge the assumption held by most religious people that religion is the best and only source of morals.

The abovementioned generational differences between campers have implications for both the study of youth and religion in America as well as the study of how an American identity is formed and expressed. I argue that the results of this supportive environment, namely the confidence of the teenage campers to express their non-religion, challenges research regarding the benefits of religion for youth in the United States. Research in this area prioritizes the ability of religions to create positive life outcomes for young Americans, but the ethnographic accounts

from Camp Quest Montana throw this conclusion into some doubt. The NSYR, particularly the work done by Christian Smith, found that religions provide certain features for young people that help them create better lives. These features, put forth by the NSYR team, are the development of moral orders, learned competencies, and strong social and organizational ties. Based on my observations at Camp Quest Montana it is clear that these particular non-religious Americans are gaining each of these benefits through non-religious activities, of which Camp Quest Montana is only an example. This throws into doubt conclusions regarding the ineffable quality of American religion that is thought to be so capable in creating happy Americans.

Through experiences like Camp Quest Montana, I argue that these non-religious teenagers are provided the tools and resources that make it possible to assimilate a larger normative American identity that is predominantly accepting and tolerant. The teenagers' strong reactions to religious expressions that persecute members of the LGBTQ community are examples of their complete identification with American norms and show how they have integrated those norms into their non-religious identity. Tensions between themselves and religious Americans, when viewed through this lens, can be thought of as expressions of this identity that encourages the teenage Camp Questers to enforce the American identity norms of tolerance and acceptance. They have talked about themselves using beliefs to gain entrance in American society, made themselves comfortable through the spiritual foundations of those beliefs, and now, through their reactions to the treatment of LGBTQ individuals, they are using that newfound sense of acceptance to start enforcing the "house rules."

An experience that occurred on the drive to camp set the tone for my stay in Montana. While driving to the camp in my rental car I was listening to the radio for about twenty minutes or so before I realized that I was listening to a Christian radio station. I think the song that clued

me in was one that repeated “Praise Him” over and over again to the point where I realized it was a capital H. Perhaps the use of “praise” should have been my first hint, but I was not really paying attention. I didn’t know it at the time, but this experience would actually reflect the perspective that I gained after a full week at Camp Quest. I was in Montana only temporarily and would leave in a week to go back to Canada, but the Camp Questers live every day of their lives surrounded by religion, an experience only glimpsed by my inadvertent encounter with Christian radio. Americans proclaim the importance of their relationship to God on their roofs, lawns, trucks, roadside signs, billboards, public debate, and perhaps most important, in their politics. Abby and Jed live on a road where a church has a giant sign that proclaims “Jesus is Coming. Date to be Announced.” They have to drive by this every day just to get to their home. I even saw a homeless person who had drawn an Ichthys (the Jesus Fish symbol) on his piece of cardboard asking for money.

The Camp Questers cannot escape reference to religion and the resulting normative assumption that people in America are religious. Their response has been to create expressions of non-religion that integrate elements from the surrounding religious milieu. Though they emphasise that science is the foundation for their beliefs, Camp Questers still need to feel like they are vital and accepted members in a culture that is predominantly religious. By attending Camp Quest Montana, the people introduced to you in this thesis are interacting with others like them in order to develop social resources and tools that make that acceptance possible. Camp Quest Montana provides a spiritual foundation for the development of beliefs as well as the confidence and vocabulary to communicate those beliefs. Their experience at camp is part of a complex negotiation with the surrounding culture to recognize that even though the Camp Questers are not religious, they are very much American.

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