

**NAVIGATING ATHEIST IDENTITIES: AN ANALYSIS OF
NONRELIGIOUS PERCEPTIONS AND EXPERIENCES IN THE
RELIGIOUSLY DIVERSE CANADIAN CITY OF OTTAWA**

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Thesis submitted to the
Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Doctorate in Philosophy degree in Religious Studies

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Abstract

There is very little research that is empirically-based about atheism in Canada; this thesis seeks to contribute foundational knowledge in this area. It begins with a historical and contemporary overview of atheism in Canada by examining its appearance in government, law, and media. It then addresses the question: “How do atheists construct their identities in the context of a religiously diverse Canada?” through an analysis of data collected from participant-observation with an atheist university club, the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO), followed by an analysis of five significant themes which arose from forty life history interviews (twenty with ACUO members; twenty with Ottawa-area atheists who did not belong to an atheist community that met in person). These themes are: loss of religious identity and/or development of atheist identity; group belonging; perceptions of media and public understanding of atheism; the use of the United States for narrative or comparative purposes; and the frequency of receiving a negative reaction simply for being an atheist. This study found that most interviewees perceived the Canadian public and the media as not understanding atheism because the subject is not commonly reported on or discussed, and many said that (ir)religiosity rarely came up in conversations with strangers, acquaintances, or co-workers. These notions were often seen as resulting from a Canadian social etiquette which dictates that controversial subjects should be avoided in order to minimize the risk of causing offense. Moreover, members of the ACUO often said that they joined an atheist community because they wanted a safe space to meet like-minded people with whom they could freely discuss religion without causing offense to religious others. Unlike in findings from the United States, interviewees did not speak of their atheist identities as being considered ‘un-Canadian’ or as excluding them from their conception(s) of Canadian society. While interviewees often said they were selective with whom they decided to express their atheism, most felt quite positive about living as an atheist in Canada, especially compared to the plight of atheists living in other countries, and atheism came across as being ‘just’ another ‘idea’ in a mosaic of cultural ideas.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the staff and faculty of the Department of Classics and Religious Studies at the University of Ottawa who have been exceptionally supportive throughout my years of study. My research has been conducted under the SSHRC-funded Religion and Diversity Project which is directed by my supervisor, Dr. Lori G Beaman. I am indebted to Dr. Beaman for her constant encouragement and inspiration.

I would like to offer my gratitude to those who welcomed me as a participant-observer into their community, as well as those who agreed to be interviewed, trusting me with their intimate life stories and personal thoughts on religion and atheism. Without them this thesis would never have been possible, and I am truly appreciative!

I am deeply thankful to my family for their continuous support and to my friends and colleagues, who were always there to listen, share ideas, and offer advice during my studies.

Finally, I would like to offer a heartfelt ‘thanks’ to the late Anne Catherine Stevenson who provided me with a place to stay when I was an undergraduate at the University of Prince Edward Island. I am forever grateful for her kindness.

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Legend

ACUO = Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa

CFI = Centre for Inquiry

NGAA = Non-Group-Affiliated Atheists

Chapter One: Introduction

*Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.*¹
– Sam Harris

*The statement “I do not believe in God” has meant something slightly different at each period of history. The people who have been dubbed “atheists” over the years have always denied a particular conception of the divine.*²
– Karen Armstrong

1.1 Topic of Research

The title of the crime “identity theft” is misleading, yet it continues to be used in regular conversation and in some cases official state acts and laws. As Kwame Anthony Appiah explains, identities are social forms that include characteristics such as “genders and sexual orientations, ethnicities and nationalities, professions and vocations;” they are derived from social categorizations and function collectively “to structure possible narratives of the individual self.”³ Identities are thus not something concrete that can be stolen, but rather, identity theft refers to the impersonation of another person’s ‘legal’ identity, often through obtaining elements of identification such as a person’s date of birth, address, credit or debit card, bank account number, passport, insurance numbers, driver’s license, and so on. When an atheist is a victim of identity theft, the thief is in all likelihood not stealing the atheistic elements of an atheist’s identity, for being an atheist is but one aspect of an individual’s identity – a socially-dependent

¹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 51.

² Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), xx.

³ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), xiv, 22.

self-constructed one based on “things that matter”⁴ – and in the case of so-called ‘identity theft,’ a rather irrelevant one. One’s religiosity or irreligiosity is not static; as Peter Beyer has shown based on an analysis of 300 interviews with 1.5 and second generation Canadian immigrants. Religious identities are fluid⁵ – even when one identifies with a specific religion one’s relationship to that religion will shift throughout one’s life course. This finding is also supported by Jessie M. Smith in his study based on participant-observation and 40 interviews with atheists in Colorado:

I take identity to be fluid and shifting, rather than fixed and permanent. This is consistent with how most of the participants in this study moved from religious identities, to atheist identities, as a result of important changes in meaning and social context.⁶

Yet religiosity, or in this case, the lack thereof, is certainly considered an important element of one’s identity in Western cultures, to the extent that it finds protection in many constitutional regimes. In Canada, for example, the freedom of religion, along with freedom of conscience, is a constitutionally protected right, found in section 2.a) of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, and section 2.b) guarantees the right to “freedom of thought, belief, opinion and expression.”⁷ In the interpretation of these provisions the courts have consistently included non-belief, including “atheism and agnosticism.”⁸

In light of the constitutional (i.e. legal) seriousness with which religion, and by extension, irreligion, is taken in Canada, I wanted to know why Canadian atheists are increasingly organizing into specifically atheist or irreligious communities, how those atheists construct their

⁴ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 40. “I can define my identity only against the background of things that matter. But to bracket out history, nature, society, the demands of solidarity, everything but what I find in myself, would be to eliminate all candidates for what matters.”

⁵ See Peter Beyer, “From Atheist to Spiritual But Not Religious: A Punctuated Continuum of Identities among the Second Generation of Post-1970 Immigrants in Canada,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 137-151.

⁶ Jessie M. Smith, 2011, “Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism,” *Sociology of Religion*, 72(2): 215-237, 217

⁷ “Constitution Acts, 1867 to 1982,” <http://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/Const/page-15.html>, *Government of Canada*, Justice Laws Website, accessed August 22, 2014.

⁸ See *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay*, 2015, Supreme Court of Canada, Paragraph 70.

identities as atheists, how that process is shaped by the context in which they find themselves, and what constitutes an agenda for a club seemingly based on only one concept, a negation of theism. I also wanted to know how atheists in general – not just those who belong to atheist communities – experience and perceive atheism in multicultural Canada. Simply stated, this thesis asks and addresses the question: “How do atheists construct their identities in the context of a religiously diverse Canada?” It does so by analyzing data collected through participant-observation with a university club, the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO), which is located in Canada’s capital city, through life history interviews with 20 of the ACUO’s most active members, and through life history interviews with Ottawa-area non-active atheists (those who identify as atheist but do not belong to an atheist community or organization that meet in person).

1.2 Development of Thesis Subject Matter and Focus

My Master’s thesis, *In Science We Trust: Dissecting the Chimera of New Atheism* (2010), was a discourse analysis on ‘New Atheist’ literature.⁹ In the process of completing that project I analysed the writings on religion by popular (globally prominent) contemporary atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, as well as their critics, including Terry Eagleton and Alexander McGrath. In addition to considering the potential influence of this atheist movement, while I was engaged with that research I also wondered how it related to the lived experiences of everyday atheists, particular in Canada. Did Canadian

⁹ The ‘chimera’ referred to the media dubbed ‘four horsemen of New Atheism’, a title which had been adopted by these atheists themselves: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Each of these so-called ‘new’ atheists had written a bestseller book on the subject of religion (Harris had written two). My thesis was a deconstruction of these books so as to shed light on how their opinions differed amongst themselves, where they were similar, where they as both individuals and as a group stood in relation to the academic debate on certain issues and theories such as secularization and the interactions between science and religion. My main point was to transcend the popular notion that they are monotone in opinion, and instead focus on lifting their individual veils.

atheists, for example, have the same concerns and similar experiences as American atheists, or atheists from England?

By summer 2010, while I was still in the process of editing my Masters' thesis, I believed that New Atheism was fading as a media-driven movement. On August 16, 2010, before the death of Christopher Hitchens, I gave a presentation at the XXth World Congress of the International Association for the History of Religions with the title "Pushing up Daisies: The Death of New Atheism."¹⁰ I was still interested in atheism – only my interest shifted from wanting to hear privileged, authoritative voices for atheism to a desire to hear the voices of 'average' atheists who live in 'common' circumstances, i.e., those without a soapbox.

For my PhD I wanted to build upon my research in contemporary atheism by venturing into how atheism plays out on the 'ground' level by studying how contemporary local atheists who join atheist groups actually 'live' their atheism in a localized setting. I wanted to know what decision-making process prompts people to join an atheist community, as well as learn about the beliefs and practices of atheist groups and their members. This interest coincided with a chance meeting with a start-up group called the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa.

During my first month as a PhD student, as I took a stroll through the recruitment tables set up as part of the University of Ottawa's orientation week I came across a table display by the newly formed Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa, who, according to the President of the club (one of two people hosting the table), had approximately a dozen members signed up. After commenting on the table set up, which consisted of bulletin boards with seemingly

¹⁰ In a nutshell, my argument can be rather adequately compared to a pop culture journalist in the late 1960's arguing that Beatlemania is dead: there are no clear demarcations for how to determine when some 'scenes' die – there is no 'clinical death', so to speak, for most scenes, especially scenes considered to have faded – and as such attempts to answer this abstract question are surely subjective.

randomly placed printout photos of New Atheists such as Christopher Hitchens and pink and blue picture-less pamphlets bearing the name Secular Student Alliance, I introduced myself as a PhD student interested in studying local atheist groups. The club's president seemed welcoming, supportive, and enthusiastic when I asked if he would mind if I did participant-observation and eventually solicited interviews with the club. To me it seemed like perfect timing: I was right there at the beginning, and with permission from the group and its president I could watch as an atheist club grew organically. With his permission orally granted, I immediately decided to focus my PhD research on the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa. That decision shaped both the scope and the direction of this thesis. I was able to perform participant-observation with them over what turned out to be their three year lifespan.

The clearest example of how the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa shaped the direction of my thesis is by looking at my initial hypothesis. Probably because most of the research I had read was from the United States, I initially hypothesised that atheists who are active in atheist communities would tend to feel marginalized as a social group and therefore seek comfort in camaraderie. However, as my research progressed I realised that the principle reason that members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa joined that community was a simple desire to converse with "like-minded" people, not that they felt marginalized. The second most cited reason for joining was a desire to converse in a safe place where the probability of causing offence was minimized. Since my initial hypothesis was proven incorrect, at least with regard to this particular group, I began to formulate a new question, one based on the themes which arose from my interviews. The new question I wanted to explore, based on the results from the interviews I had conducted with the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa, was – and is – “How do atheists construct their identities in the context of

a religiously diverse Canada?” In order to address this question this thesis includes one chapter based on participant-observation which is primarily concerned with explaining the clubs agenda and penchant for controversy, and five chapters, each dealing with one significant theme raised during the interviews: loss of religious identity and/or development of atheist identity; group belonging; perceptions of media and public understanding of atheism; the use of the United States for narrative or comparative purposes; and experiences of being an atheist. In order to set the context it also includes a chapter about Canada’s historical and contemporary religious character as it pertains to atheism.

1.3 Scope

The purpose of this thesis is three-fold:

1. Offer a historical and contemporary overview of atheism in Canada generally;
2. Provide a detailed biographical account of the lifespan and activities of the ACUO; and,
3. Analyze the opinions of 20 of the most active members of the ACUO, in conjunction with the opinions of 20 Ottawa-area atheists who are not actively engaged with any atheist groups, concerning issues pertaining to atheism in Canada and identity.

There is very little research that is empirically based about atheists in Canada and my thesis seeks to contribute to foundational knowledge in this area. I seek to understand atheist identity construction at the individual level and in relation to belonging to atheist groups. My primary interest is in learning more about how atheists understand and construct their atheist identities in the context of Canadian culture. This thesis explores the cultural context of atheism by examining its appearance in important social institutions, primarily government, law, and media. One important aspect of Canadian culture is the idea of multiculturalism, which represents a

demographic reality, an ideology, and a political programme, among other things. The demographic reality aspect of multiculturalism, which I refer to as ‘diversity’, has salience in terms of how atheists understand themselves within Canadian society, and this came out in interviews when interviewees reflected upon being an atheist in Canada, as well as in practice when the ACUO engaged with the public.

The scope of this thesis is thus an analysis of atheism in Canada through an exploration of historical incidents and contemporary events relating to government, law, and media; a bibliographic explanation of the ACUO and their main engagements with the public; and an analysis of the themes raised by 40 interviewees and what those themes tell us about atheism in a religiously diverse Canada. Although the data is limited to Ottawa, the results of this thesis will be useful to those interested in religion and irreligion in Canada, as well as those who are interested in atheism – collective or independent – for comparison purposes.

1.4 Terminology

‘Atheism’ is derived from the Ancient Greek word ‘atheos’ – “a” translates as “without” or “not” and “theos” refers to “god.”¹¹ In ancient usage, the Greeks referred to those who were “deniers of the gods,” as ‘atheos’ and those who committed the crime of “impiety or disrespect towards the gods” as ‘atheotes’.¹² According to Michel Onfray, the “Greek term ‘atheos’ dates from the seventh century BCE, was later incorporated into Latin, and thus was in use throughout Greek and Roman antiquity. It was an expression of severe censure and moral condemnation.”¹³

¹¹ Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

¹² A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, (London: Glydendal, 1922), 5-6.

¹³ Michel Onfray, *In Defense of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), 15.

In the sixteenth century the term ‘atheist’ entered the English language.¹⁴ The Oxford dictionary defines atheism as “disbelief in the existence of a god or gods.”¹⁵

Although it is not in the main interest of this thesis to categorize self-described atheists under smaller umbrellas, it is important to note for context that even under the term ‘atheist’ different branches can be found. According to Michael Martin there are two main branches, positive and negative atheism:

Negative atheism in the broad sense is [...] the absence of belief in any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God, and negative atheism in the narrow sense is the absence of belief in a theistic God. Positive atheism in the broad sense is, in turn, disbelief in all gods, with positive atheism in the narrow sense being the disbelief in a theistic God. For positive atheism in the narrow sense to be successfully defended, two tasks must be accomplished. First, the reasons for believing in a theistic God must be refuted; in other words, negative atheism in the narrow sense must be established. Second, reasons for disbelieving in the theistic God must be given.¹⁶

In other words, those who hold *no belief* “in the existence of a God or gods”¹⁷ can be called *negative* atheists, whereas those who *believe* “that there is no God or gods”¹⁸ can be called *positive* atheists. This is an important distinction to make as it highlights two different ways of thinking that lead to the self-identification or rejection of the term atheist; those who simply call themselves atheists are not a monolithic collective. This thesis, however, is concerned with the lived experiences of those who identify as atheist in general and as such is not interested with categorization beyond self-categorization.

Today atheists may simply call themselves ‘atheists’ or they may go by a number of related terms that offer different nuances of their individual personalities or emphasize a particular aspect of their identities. In fact, many atheists go by more than one of these terms. These terms include, but are certainly not limited to: agnostic; atheist; agnostic-atheist; apathetic;

¹⁴ Onfray, 15.

¹⁵ Catherine Soanes; Sara Hawker; and Julia Elliot, *Oxford Dictionary of Current English: Fourth Edition*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49.

¹⁶ Martin, 2.

¹⁷ Martin, 1.

¹⁸ Martin, 1.

anti-theist; bright; freethinker; humanist; irreligious; materialist; naturalist; rationalist; sceptic; and secularist. In addition, some atheists opt not to self-identify with the term atheist, due to either its negative historical connotations, or being of the opinion that a word for something one does not believe in is unnecessary. On this point, one of the most prominent New Atheists, Sam Harris, is of the opinion that ‘atheism’ is “a term that should not even exist. [...] We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.”¹⁹ Yet other atheists, including Richard Dawkins, embrace the term.

The data in this thesis is based on interviews with subjects who *self-identified as an atheist during the interview*, (the one exception used the term “nonbeliever” as a self-descriptor). While some interviewees also identify with other terms, such as humanist or sceptic, and occasionally they would even identify more strongly with these other terms than with the term ‘atheist’, the main commonality is that, other than that one exception, they all responded “yes” to the third interview question: “Do you describe yourself as an atheist?”²⁰

A few other terms do come up from time to time and as such need to be addressed. These terms are ‘agnostic’, ‘humanist’, and ‘religious nones’.

‘Agnosticism’ was coined by a contemporary of Charles Darwin, Thomas Henry (T.H.) Huxley, in the 19th century. While Huxley believed that science provided knowledge, he did not believe that scientific advances should lead to atheism, arguing that science could tell us nothing about God.²¹ In Huxley’s words:

¹⁹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 51.

²⁰ For tables showing how each interviewee defined ‘atheist’ see Appendix I.

²¹ Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the limits of Knowledge*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 9.

Agnosticism is of the essence of science, whether ancient or modern. It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe... Consequently Agnosticism puts aside not only the greater part of popular theology, but also the greater part of anti-theology.²²

Today those who identify as agnostic (from the Greek: “a” translates as “without” or “not” and “gnostic,” which translates as “knowledge”) are in all likelihood identifying with the notion that it is not possible for humans to know whether or not there is a god. In practice this means agnostics live their life as if there is no god – at least there is not a theological imperative to go to a church, synagogue or mosque if one is certain that knowledge of God’s existence (and the existence of gods) is impossible for humans to acquire. It is important to be aware of the distinction between what the term agnostic means to an agnostic and the way agnostics are commonly portrayed. Agnostics are often referred to as those who ‘sit on a fence’ between theism and atheism because they ‘can’t make up their minds.’ This caricature misses the point that most self-identified agnostics are making a definitive statement that they are content with uncertainty and not ‘afraid’ of making a decision; they believe that neither side of ‘the fence’ has access to the evidence to back up their claims. When the terms ‘agnostic’ or ‘agnosticism’ are used in this thesis it is meant to be understood as a legitimate position related to religiosity, not as derogatory.

Humanism, as a movement, began in the nineteenth century by English Christian Unitarians and Universalists.²³ In the twentieth century liberal Humanism as a movement began questioning theism and advocating secularism. Today ‘humanism’ is largely affiliated with atheism and agnosticism. The term “humanism” in this thesis is used in reference to a secular

²² Alister McGrath, *Dawkins’ God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. (Malden, MA USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 54.

²³ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, 2007, “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism”, *Sociology of Religion*, 68(4):407-424, 408. “The religious roots of humanism can be found in Unitarian and Universalist ideals, which emerged after a segment of Congregational churches in the eighteenth century rejected such key Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the teaching that God can condemn people to hell.”

philosophy that advocates compassion for other humans, and it is associated with a lack of traditional religiosity, although in some instances humanists embrace social elements that have religious connotations but are not necessarily religious, or the ‘property’ of religion, such as rites of passage.

‘Religious nones’ is a statistical category which denotes those who profess no religion on censuses. This category includes atheists, agnostics, humanists, the other related terms listed above, and even those who – for a multitude of reasons – do not want to share with their government and fellow citizens their religious identity.²⁴ Since the Canadian census uses this categorization it occasionally makes an appearance in this thesis. It is best to keep in mind, however, that religious nones is an umbrella term that includes self-identified atheists and other people who do not belong to a religion.

1.5 Previous Literature on ‘Modern’ Atheism

Throughout history many people have been accused of being atheist, promoted religio-critical ideas, and/or self-identified as an atheist or as nonreligious. For practical purposes, this brief discussion of previous works on atheism therefore has to be selective. I have chosen to narrow this short discussion down to ‘modern’²⁵ Western²⁶ writers, and I will only mention a few of the most commonly cited – and arguably most influential – names.²⁷

²⁴ For example, a new Canadian citizen who moved to Canada from a country where religion as a term was not celebrated (such as China) may want to keep her religious affiliation secret; a Christian who just moved here from a country where persecution of Christianity is not uncommon (i.e. a Coptic Christian from Egypt) may choose to keep his religious affiliation hidden.

²⁵ By ‘Modern’ I refer to during and after the Scientific Revolution, which George Basalla explains accordingly: “A small circle of Western European nations provide the original home for modern science during the 16th and 17th centuries: Italy, France, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries. The relatively small geographical area covered by these nations was the scene of the Scientific Revolution which firmly established the philosophical viewpoint, experimental activity, and social institutions we now identify as modern science.” George Basalla, 1967, “The Spread of Western Science,” *Science*, New Series, 156(3775): 611-622, 611.

The section that follows offers a brief introduction to the writings on religion (and/or atheism) by atheists; the subsequent section acknowledges some influential secondary sources which seek to explain atheism from a sociological perspective. It includes some of the most prominent scholars in the growing field of atheism studies so as to best situate this thesis in terms of academic context at this period in time.

1.5.1 Primary Sources: Select Principal Actors in the Rise of Modern Atheism

In much of the literature on ‘modern’ atheism the names Spinoza, Paine, Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud often come up as primary sources. Historical thinkers are often re-considered as time moves forward and given new labels to fit contemporary narratives, and this is certainly the case with these authors. Some of them cannot be considered atheists based solely on their writings; Dutch philosopher Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677), for example, criticized the popular theology of his space and time in his posthumously published *Ethics* (1677), yet he professed to believe in God, explained as an abstract impartial and non-interventionist substance from which nature is derived. Thomas Paine (1739-1809), an English-American journalist, likewise proclaimed in *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology* (1794-1807) that he did not believe in any church, yet he also explained that he still believed in one God. On the other hand, the budding of ideas that would later lead to outright atheism in the Western context are certainly evident in these works.

By the late 17th century there were quite a few atheists who wrote atheistic literature, which shows a self-identification with atheism by some intellectuals, rather than an identification

²⁶ My argument is based on a specific narrative of atheism which developed out of Europe. It must be noted that every religious tradition includes elements of religious contrarianism (atheist or otherwise) which shapes those faiths and takes different forms, and atheism also has its own rich history in the East.

²⁷ For a detailed account of the historical evolution of atheism from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment see Chapter 2 of my Masters’ thesis, *In Science We Trust: Dissecting the Chimera of New Atheism* (2010).

derived from accusation – although being known as an atheist still carried personal risk. Here are some examples: In 1674, a former schoolteacher and preacher from Germany, Matthias Knutzen (1646-1674), wrote and distributed three pamphlets²⁸ which propagated atheistic ideas and he subsequently went on the run to avoid arrest. In 1680, Casimir Liszinski (1634-1689), a Polish nobleman and landowner, was publically executed for writing a treatise called *The Nonexistence of God*. In 1729, French Catholic priest Jean Meslier (1664-1729) died leaving behind a voluminous unpublished testament addressed to his parishioners which contains many critiques of religion and denies God's existence. In 1744, French philosopher and writer Denis Diderot (1713-1784) completed a book titled *The Skeptic's Walk*, which questions the Bible and God; the only copy was confiscated by the police in 1752 and it was not published until 1830. In 1770, German-French author Baron d'Holbach (1723–1789) anonymously published a book titled *The System of Nature* which denies God's existence, arguing instead for a philosophical materialistic, or naturalistic, view of the universe. In 1811, English poet Percy Bysshe Shelley was expelled from Oxford for writing and distributing a pamphlet titled *The Necessity of Atheism*. These are but a few examples of atheist writers from the late 17th through the early 19th century who risked personal liberties, even life, by putting their atheistic thoughts down on paper.

During the 19th and 20th centuries atheists continued to share their ideas about religion through literature more openly than ever before in European society. They often sought to explain, from an atheist point of view, what religion is, where religion came from, and the repercussions for society should religion cease to exist. Here are a few of the more popular examples: In 1841, German philosopher Ludwig Andreas von Feuerbach's (1804-1872) book,

²⁸ Their titles (in English) are: *Letter of a Friend to a Friend*; *Conversation between a Host and three Guests of different Religion*; and, *Conversation between an Army Chaplain called Dr Heinrich Brummern and a Latin Pattern-Writer*.

The Essence of Christianity, was published, which argues that Christianity, and by extension religion, is nothing more than a reflection, or projection, of the human condition. In 1843, Karl Marx (1818-1883), a philosopher born in Germany who died living in England, wrote *A Criticism of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right*, which explains religion as a human-construct and an alienating and oppressive force in society. German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote a few works that express his atheism, including *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* (1883-1885), which assumes a societal shift away from belief in God and acts as a call to recreate morality and purpose in our own human, or 'superhuman' (our future, highly self-cultivated), image. In *The Future of an Illusion*, published in 1927, the Austrian creator of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) argues that religion is the product of wishful thinking; it is our shared desire for a divine father to provide eternal protection. He argues that religion has served its purpose and life would be better if we stripped religion from civilization, to which it is presently attached. In 1927, British philosopher Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) gave a speech which was subsequently published as a pamphlet titled, *Why I Am Not a Christian*, which asserts his atheism and questions the morality of religion. There are other works by these writers which also deal with religion from an atheist perspective, just as there were many other atheist writers during this period, but this select list serves as an example of what can be considered 'atheist primary source' material.

Currently, the most popular contemporary literature by atheists about religion and/or atheism is that of 'New Atheism', which can be understood as a 21st century Western (to some extent 'global', but it certainly springs from a Western context) 'atheist pride' movement that revolved around bestselling books by outspoken atheists. The most well-known New Atheist writers are British biologist Richard Dawkins, American philosopher Daniel Dennett, American

neuroscientist Sam Harris, and the late British-American journalist and essayist Christopher Hitchens.²⁹ Their books,³⁰ and the strong personalities behind them, have stimulated atheist awareness campaigns in the forms of advertisements, conferences, and an increased media presence. Their arguments are science-based and pro-secularization; they dismiss religions as delusionary, poisonous, and/or dangerous phenomenon which came about due to the evolution of societies but have since outlasted their usefulness.

Atheism from the twentieth century to the present owes much to the above writers in terms of ideas, arguments, themes, concerns, and scope. Indeed, even those who did not self-identify as atheist, such as Spinoza, are often cited in many modern books by atheists about religion: when it comes to previous works on the topic of ‘atheism’, contemporary writers commonly historicize the primary source material and offer theory as to timing, meaning, and the authors’ religious dispositions. Those who do self-identify as atheist, such as the New Atheists, are often considered by the media, public, and some scholars as representing contemporary atheism.

There are many more atheist writers who have written atheistic literature than the examples mentioned above. This section was limited for practicality and readability, but it does provide a sense of the most common primary source materials that are often used by scholars of atheism.³¹ The next section addresses contemporary secondary source material.

²⁹ For a detailed analysis of New Atheism and its relationship to science, secularism, and religion, see my Master’s thesis, *In Science We Trust: Dissecting the Chimera of New Atheism* (2010).

³⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004); Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007); Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004); and, Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2007).

³¹ For a more detailed account of the history of religious doubt, which includes atheism and thus atheist primary source material, see Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History: The Great Doubters and Their Legacy of Innovation from Socrates and Jesus to Thomas Jefferson and Emily Dickinson*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2003). For a more

1.5.2 Contemporary Secondary Sources

The contemporary sociological literature directly addressing atheism is just beginning to gain traction, and some of the most ground-breaking work being done is happening at the graduate level. Recently, however, a few important works have been published which have been making an impact in the growing field of atheism and/or nonreligion studies.

The Cambridge Companion to Atheism (2007) by Michael Martin sheds light on atheism from antiquity and modern history, addressing issues such as atheism and freedom of religion, atheism and feminism, and atheism and the postmodern condition. It is useful for measuring the socio-political context of atheism over the course of history, as well as introducing some of the major philosophical arguments for atheism.

In the introduction to *Atheism and Secularity* (2010), a collection of essays on contemporary and historical atheism, editor and author Phil Zuckerman notes that it was “assembled and published in a concerted effort to not only begin filling a major lacuna within the social sciences, but more hopefully, to inspire further social-scientific research on irreligiosity in all its numerous dimensions and varied manifestations” (Zuckerman 2010, xi). This two-volume set covers many topics from definitions to global analysis based on sociological and historical data. As such it is an often-cited volume which also points to the myriad ways atheism and non-belief can be studied.

Also in 2010, Amarnath Amarasingam, having acknowledged that academia had “largely dismissed” the writings of the New Atheists as “unsophisticated, crude, and lacking nuance” edited a volume, *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, which uses sociological

specific account of modern atheism see Gavin Hyman, “Atheism in Modern History,” in Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 27-46.

methods to study New Atheism. While New Atheism is not the topic of this thesis, this book is helpful for the consideration of whether and to what degree atheists are aware of and identify with the writings associated with New Atheism.

Lois Lee, a founding director of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network (NRSN), has been quite influential in her analysis of terminology. In particular, she argues that:

‘non-religion’ be given a general definition that qualifies it as the master or defining concept for the field; that the use of ‘atheism’ be strictly restricted to the task of indicating god-centred outlooks and/or individuals and cultures who/which appropriate the term; that the precise concepts of non-religion and atheism be untangled from the confused and confusing terminology of ‘the secular’, ‘secularism’, and ‘secularity’.³²

She defines ‘non-religion’ as anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion³³ and this definition is commonly used by those who study atheism and related non-religious identities.

Also working both independently and in collaboration with NSRS, Christopher Cotter has authored a typology of nonreligion based on his research on Scottish University Students. In it he argues that “current typologies based on internally and/or externally selected and defined ‘nonreligious’ identity labels tend to be inadequate and inaccurate,” pointing out that his research subjects often maintained “multiple identities simultaneously, in a situational and pragmatic fashion.”³⁴ He opts instead for a more nuanced approach when it comes to classification, and subsequently classifies “individuals according to the overarching narrative through which they claim to interact with (non)religion.”³⁵ Cotter has also worked with Abby Day and Giselle Vincett on a collection of essays which explore and challenge the boundaries of the ‘sacred’ and

³² Lois Lee, 2012, *Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies*, *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, January, 27(1): 129-139, 130.

³³ *Ibid.*, 131.

³⁴ Christopher Cotter, *Toward a Typology of ‘Nonreligion’: A Qualitative Analysis of Everyday Narratives of Scottish University Students*, Dissertation, School of Divinity of The University of Edinburgh, 2011, iii.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

the ‘secular’ in a range of contexts.³⁶ Abby Day’s work on contemporary belief and social identity is also useful for the study of atheism and nonreligion as it explores how religious identifications are often chosen in order to provide people with a sense of belonging, even for people who are otherwise non-religious.

Other social scientists who have made important contributions to the study of atheism include Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith. They study atheism from an American ethnographic perspective, arguing that American atheists feel socially excluded and as a result have begun employing three strategies to grow and protect themselves within a “highly religious society”: 1) competing with other atheist groups in order to attract people looking for “communities of meaning”; 2) borrowing elements from evangelical Protestantism; and 3) utilizing minority discourse and identity politics.³⁷

Stephen Bullivant has analysed the pros and cons of large-scale survey use. His work has found that “Oxford students in late 2007 are surely one of the least religious [...] ever studied in the United Kingdom,”³⁸ and he is presently involved in exploring the role that online social communities play in atheist expression, conversion, and organization.

These scholars are a few examples of the increasing body of research on atheism. Most of the cutting edge research being done in this area is American or British and often deals with terminology, atheist organizations (including the concept of New Atheism), individual self-identification, and the social scientific study of nonreligion in general. The study of atheism and nonreligion in Canada is also relatively new and as a result relatively limited.

³⁶ Abby Day, Giselle Vincett, Christopher R. Cotter, *Social Identities Between the Sacred and the Secular*, (Burlington: Ashgate, 2013).

³⁷ Cimino, and Smith, “Secular” 412.

³⁸ Stephen Bullivant, 2008, “Research Note: Sociology and the Study of Atheism,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23(3): 363-368, 367.

1.5.2.1 Previous Literature on Atheism in Canada

When thinking about atheism in Canada only a few scholars come to mind, some of whom are at the beginning stages of their careers. There is relatively little work being done by Canadians in this field. Stephen LeDrew, for example, has written about what he argues are two strands of atheism: ‘scientific atheism’ and ‘humanistic atheism’.³⁹ From there he historicizes different strands of atheisms based on what they ‘believe’ as opposed to what they ‘negate’. He argues that New Atheism is a fundamentalist political movement promoting individuality and scientific authority, which he compares with other atheist movements which instead have an emphasis on ethics and social justice.⁴⁰ While his work is useful for contextualizing ‘atheisms’ overall, it does not speak specifically to Canadian atheism. Likewise, Spencer Bullivant, a colleague and fellow graduate student at the University of Ottawa is also studying atheism, although his focus is on American atheist summer camps for children. There is other work being done on atheism in Canada by renowned scholars of religion which speaks to larger issues – Lori G. Beaman, for example, has recently been looking at atheist legal battles in Canada; William A. Stahl has been researching the discourse between science and religion as well as how atheism fits into notions of secularism in Canada – but the study of atheism in Canada is largely lacking specifically Canadian ethnographic and interview-based research.⁴¹

³⁹ Stephen LeDrew, 2014, *Atheists are Believers*, <http://blog.nsrn.net/2014/03/21/atheists-are-believers/>, Nonreligion & Secularity: The Official Blog of the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network [online], Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network, March 21. According to LeDrew: “Scientific atheism is a product of Enlightenment rationalism and Victorian Darwinism, grounding the critique of religion in the natural sciences and considering it a false explanation of nature that is superseded by modern science. Religion, from this point of view, is strictly a matter of belief. Humanistic atheism is a product of the emergent social sciences of the mid-19th century, particularly Marxism, grounding the critique of religion in a conception of social justice and considering it a manifestation of, and response to, alienation and suffering. From this perspective religion is a social phenomenon rather than a matter of individual beliefs.”

⁴⁰ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism: The Politics of a Modern Movement*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁴¹ For essays on atheism by the scholars mentioned in this paragraph, in addition to other scholars at the forefront of atheism studies, see Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015)

1.6 Structure and Organization

This thesis consists of ten chapters. Chapter two historicizes atheism in Canada and contextualizes the contemporary climate. Its focus is primarily federal. Chapter three explains the methodology and theoretical frameworks used to collect and analyse data for the chapters that follow, which deal with atheism in a narrower context. Chapter four provides a historical overview, based on ethnography and discourse analysis, of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa. Chapters five through nine analyse select themes derived from 20 interviews with members of that community in conjunction with themes derived from 20 interviews with Ottawa-area atheists who do not belong to any active atheist communities that meet in person. Chapters five and six, respectively, address how they came to self-identify as atheists and why they have, or have not, decided to join an in-person atheist community. Chapters seven, eight, and nine explore the interviewees' opinions on atheism in Canada, first by looking at how well they think the Canadian public and the media understand atheism, then by addressing how often the United States of America was raised, unprompted, by interviewees, and finally by analysing their responses to questions about how frequent they receive a negative reaction simply for being an atheist. The final chapter offers conclusions based on the previous chapters' findings and proposes a few useful avenues for future research on atheism in Canada.

Chapter Two: Setting the Scene: Canada's Historical and Contemporary Religious Character as it Pertains to Atheism

*We will enjoy here that which is the great test of constitutional freedom – we will have the rights of the minority respected.*⁴²

– John A. MacDonald, 1st Prime Minister of Canada

*For me, the church is the church and the state is the state. The two are separate spheres of life, and part of my job as prime minister was to keep them separate.*⁴³

– Jean Chrétien, 20th Prime Minister of Canada

In order to understand the opinions of contemporary atheists on the state of atheism in Canada it is important to provide context into the setting of which they live. This chapter provides context for the later chapters (chapters four through nine) which explore the activities of a Canadian atheist community and analyze how Ottawa-area atheists understand atheism in Canada today. It does so through an analysis of historical and contemporary laws and public discourse that relate to atheism, and it is presented in chronological order.

2.1 Historical

In the mid-1950's, a young Saint Francis Xavier University Political Science student wrote an interesting observation about the way many citizens of Quebec differ in their interpretation of history from those of the rest of Canada:

It is not generally understood among English Canadians that Confederation is not, in the minds of French Canadians, simply a federal union of the British North American provinces, in which the will of the majority should prevail. To the French, it is a pact or treaty between French and English, which guarantees each group an equal right to its own faith, language, laws, and customs. Sir John A. MacDonald did not

⁴² Janet Aizenstat, Paul Romney, Ian Gentles, and William D. Gairdner, *Canada's Founding Debates*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 206.

⁴³ Jean Chretien, *My Years as Prime Minister*, (Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2008), 297.

regard the BNA Act as any panacea – he was much too astute for that. Rather, he saw it as a treaty through which minority rights of both English and French would be assured.⁴⁴

This observation of historical interpretation, as articulated by a future Prime Minister of Canada, Brian Mulroney, demonstrates how one’s interpretation of history has the ability to shape contemporary reality (simply consider the discourse, drive, and politics surrounding Quebec and the ongoing issue of sovereignty). History can be interpreted in different ways, and while the nuances of interpretation may seem small on paper, they may have quite a different life in the minds of interested parties.

In Mulroney’s quote, he mentions an equal right to faith, and interprets John A. MacDonald, the principal father of Canadian Federation and Canada’s first Prime Minister, as assuring minority rights. This is the starting point for this section, which focusses on the historical record as it pertains to atheism, which, in the case of the confederation debates on the protection of minority rights, is unavoidably rooted in hindsight. In this instance the context for minority rights was principally about French Catholicism and English Protestantism, but rights have since been extended to other minorities. The guiding research question in this chapter is “what is atheism’s historical and contemporary relationship to Canadian religious diversity?” This investigation of this question contextualizes this thesis, which, following the next chapter on methodology, delves from its focus on various media sources into an analysis of how a group of atheists in Ottawa *actually* view atheism, and by extension, atheism’s relationship to religious diversity in Canada.

In the following sections I describe the founding debates of the ‘Fathers of Confederation’,⁴⁵ with regard to the notion of religious ‘tolerance’, before examining the use of Canada’s law prohibiting blasphemous libel, which is followed by an analysis of the citizenship

⁴⁴ Brian Mulroney, *Memoirs 1939-1993*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 2007), 45-46.

⁴⁵ “Fathers” because women were not at the time granted the right to vote, let alone run for public office.

case of atheist immigrants Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma. The chapter then shifts to a discussion of Canada's contemporary religious character as it pertains to atheism.

2.1.2 Confederation

Canada was formed on July 1, 1867, as a federation of colonies, and the majority population of this new federation shared two distinct meta-forms of Christianity: Catholicism, which was the majority religion of francophone Quebec, and Protestantism, (such as Anglicanism and Methodism), which was the majority religion of the other provinces, Ontario, New Brunswick, and Nova Scotia.

The confederation of provinces into a federal union meant that neither form of Christianity would supersede the other. Free from an officially recognized church, both forms of Christianity were essentially provided with religious autonomy and liberty as well as the important feature of reciprocal tolerance. To this point, in the year of Canada's founding, Thomas D'Arcy McGee, a Father of Confederation, told a crowd that "[w]e must qualify ourselves to fulfill the spirit of tolerance and forbearance. It is our only means to make a great nation of a small people."⁴⁶ Moreover, provincial debates about confederation speak to a sense of tolerance and mutual respect between 'races', which in this context refers to different European ethnicities, and 'nationalities', which in turn primarily refers to the Protestant English and the Catholic French.⁴⁷ Of the latter relationship, John Rose, speaking in the Legislative Assembly of Upper Canada on February 22, 1865, said:

⁴⁶ Richard Gwyn, *Nation Maker: Sir John A. MacDonald: His Life, Our Times: Volume 2: 1867-1891*, United States of America, Random House Canada and A Gwyn Associates, 2011, 56-57.

⁴⁷ Aboriginals, Asians, Sikhs, Jews, and Muslims, among other ethnicities and religious minorities, also have rich histories in Canada, although the ways in which these people were 'tolerated' or discriminated against is certainly different than Christians of European dissent and for purposes of length, practicality, and focus, not included in this discussion. A good source for more information on minority treatment, from the historical to the contemporary, is:

There has been, ever since the time of union ... a cordial understanding and friendly feeling between the two nationalities which has produced the happiest results. Belonging to different races and professing a different faith, we live near each; we come in contact and mix with each other, and we respect each other; we do not trench upon the rights of each other; we have not had those party and religious differences which two races, speaking different languages and holding different religious beliefs, might be supposed to have had.⁴⁸

Many of the founding fathers of Canadian confederation were of the opinion that Canada's link to England had bestowed on the colonies the ability to look beyond racial, religious, and nationalistic differences and live together with mutual respect and a fair degree of harmony. In New Brunswick, John McMillan told the House of Assembly on June 5, 1865, to "[l]ook at the attitude of the mother country; there they are composed of all peoples, and yet they go on quietly and harmoniously."⁴⁹ Similarly, John A. Macdonald told the Legislative Assembly on February 6, 1865, that:

In all countries the rights of the majority take care of themselves, but it is only in countries like England enjoying constitutional liberty, and safe from the tyranny of a single despot or of an unbridled democracy, that the rights of minorities are regarded.⁵⁰

Although this sounds very utopian, it must be stressed that these minority rights were largely limited to Christianity, that is, principally minority Catholic French citizens in Protestant English Upper Canada and minority Protestant English citizens in Catholic French Lower Canada. To this point George Brown made the following remark in the same Upper Canada Legislative Assembly about the developing country two days after Macdonald made his point about the rights of minorities:

Our scheme is to establish a government that will seek to turn the tide of European emigration into this northern half of the American continent – that will strive to develop its great natural resources – and that will endeavour to maintain liberty, and justice, and Christianity throughout the land.⁵¹

Paul Bramadat and David Seljak (Eds.), *Religion and Ethnicity in Canada*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2009).

⁴⁸ Aizenstat, Romney, Gentles, and Gairdner, 342.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 329.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 133.

As Brown suggests, this sense of attentive/selective tolerance was directed toward Christian religions; it was not extended to all citizens, including those who criticized Christianity. The place of those who criticized Christianity – or *aspects* of Christianity – is best exemplified with a look at the historical use of Canada’s law prohibiting Blasphemous Libel.

2.1.3 Blasphemous Libel

In 1892, Canada adopted a law prohibiting blasphemous libel, essentially banning ‘indecent’ rhetoric critical of Christianity. This law was principally utilized by French Catholics, with four of the five prosecutions resulting from its use occurring in Quebec. It is still in section 296 of the Criminal Code of Canada, which reads, “Every one who publishes a blasphemous libel is guilty of an indictable offence and liable to imprisonment for a term not exceeding two years.”⁵²

Although the law has not been enforced since 1936, and if the law was resurrected it would certainly face an uphill battle in terms of its legitimacy in the Canadian judicial system post-Charter of Rights and Freedoms, its continued presence in the Criminal Code nonetheless poses a symbolic challenge to Canada’s current multicultural policy. Its past use, however, does provide us with some insight into a few historical legal cases which may or may not involve atheist defendants,⁵³ but certainly deal with the public expression of atheist opinions.

The law itself borrowed the language of the English Draft Code of 1879, which was never enacted. The law of blasphemous libel had long been a subject of judicial debate in

⁵² *Criminal Code (R.S., 1985, c. C-46)*,” http://laws.justice.gc.ca/en/showdoc/cs/C-46/bo-ga:l_II/en#anchorbo-ga:l_II, Department of Justice, *Government of Canada*, accessed March 26, 2009. The saving clause reads: “No person shall be convicted of an offence under this section for expressing in good faith and in decent language, or attempting to establish by argument used in good faith and conveyed in decent language, an opinion on a religious subject.”

⁵³ Although they certainly express opinions that can be considered atheistic, I am hesitant to label a defendant an atheist unless there is a historical record of said defendant claiming that label for him/herself.

England, and a famous judgment from 1883 was to be an influence not only to the future understanding of British blasphemy law, but also to the scope of Canada's. In *R v. Ramsay & Foote*, Lord Chief Justice John Coleridge stated that "I now lay it down as law, that, if the decencies of controversy are observed, even the fundamentals of religion may be attacked without the writer being guilty of blasphemy."⁵⁴ As legal scholar Jeremy Patrick points out, the influence of this notion is reflected in the language of Canada's prohibition on blasphemous libel,⁵⁵ where it states:

No person shall be convicted of an offence under this section for expressing *in good faith and in decent language*, or attempting to establish by argument used *in good faith and conveyed in decent language*, an opinion on a religious subject [emphasis added].⁵⁶

Following contemporary English law, an atheist could potentially express views contrary to Christianity, as long as the tone of the language was deemed decent, or perhaps more realistically, uncontroversial. Of course, like any law, the interpretation of language has the potential to fluctuate between judgements, and blasphemous libel is certainly no exception.

Between 1901 and 1936 there were five recorded prosecutions for blasphemous libel in Canada (*R. v. Pelletier*; *R. v. Kinler*; *R. v. Sherry*; *R. v. St. Martin*; *R. v. Rahard*), and of these there were four convictions (*R. v. Pelletier*; *R. v. Sherry*; *R. v. St. Martin*; *R. v. Rahard*). It is important to note that these cases do not necessarily involve atheist defendants; at least two defendants, for instance, criticised some forms of Christianity but were nonetheless Christian themselves. The use of this law does, however, point to how some atheist opinions on matters such as biblical criticism and organized religion were dealt with before the law between 1892 and 1936.

⁵⁴ Jeremy Patrick, 2008, "Not Dead Just Sleeping: Canada's Prohibition on Blasphemous Libel as a Case Study in Obsolete Legislation," *U.B.C. Law Review*, 41(2): 193-248, 200.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, 199-201.

⁵⁶ "Criminal."

2.1.3.1 *R. v. Pelletier*

Although the law was enacted in 1892, it was not until 1901 that there was a conviction. In *R. v. Pelletier*, the defendants pled guilty in Montreal to the blasphemy of publishing an article that consisted of “a conversation between the author and a servant on the alleged schism between the apostles Saint Peter and Saint Paul at the beginning of Christianity, regarding the baptism of Christians.”⁵⁷ While the article itself is not a matter of public record, it is clear that the judge found it to be quite offensive:

Things most sacred have been turned into jokes; sarcasm appears in every sentence in a most impious form, and, I would add, most obscene [...] It is, one feels, the creation of a libertine mind and of a spoiled heart...these expressions can be understood only as the writing of a heathen espousing evil.⁵⁸

The judge believed the defendants who argued that they neither wrote nor read the article before publication, “I believe that without difficulty, for I do not believe a Canadian pen to be capable of producing such obscenities... A foreign pen must have committed this horror,”⁵⁹ and sentenced them in 1901 to a \$100 fine. Since they pled guilty this case does not shed much light on the interpretation of the law by this judge, although we can be certain that the judge, who stated that “[t]he religion of Jesus Christ is the school of morality and truth,” did not find the article to be written in decent Christian (or Canadian) language (i.e. from a “Canadian pen”), and, in his own words, felt it was “capable of causing the death of faith and of virtue.”⁶⁰

2.1.3.2. *R. v. Kinler*

Canada’s second prosecution for blasphemous libel also occurred in Quebec. In 1925 the case *R. v. Kinler* was before a magistrate who described a pamphlet distributed by the defendants

⁵⁷ Patrick, 220.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 220.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 221. See footnote.

⁶⁰ Ibid, 220.

as salacious – but not blasphemous. According to the magistrate, the pamphlet expressed an attack on “the dogmas of the Catholic Church, the right of succession of popes and bishops to the throne of St. Peter and the apostles; the dogma of the Holy Trinity; they [also] deny the Church the right to interpret the Bible; they deny the doctrine of the immortality of the soul, and other similar things.”⁶¹ While the magistrate argued that the article in question presented an attack on “the clergy of different dominations,” he also stated that the article “does not contain anything in itself blasphemous against the Divinity.”⁶² He defined blasphemy as “a direct insult hurled at God,”⁶³ and since the pamphlet did not meet that narrow definition the case was dismissed.

2.1.3.3 *R. v. Sherry*

The third case, *R. v. Sherry*, took place in Ontario in 1926. The defendant wrote articles that exposed an unfavourable view of Christianity, including the Christian god:

Read your Bible, if you have not done it before, and you will find in it hundreds of passages relative to the Divine Being, which any moral and honest man would be ashamed to have appended to his character... The God of the [B]ible is depicted as one who... thunders imprecations from the mountain or mutters and gouches in the Tabernacle, and whom Moses finds so hard to tame, who in his paroxysms of rage has massacred hundreds of thousands of His own Chosen People... This touchy Jehovah whom the deluded superstitionists claim to be the creator of the whole universe, makes one feel utter contempt for the preachers and unfeigned pity for the mental state of those who can retain a serious countenance as they peruse the stories of His peculiar whims, freaks and fancies and His frenzied megalomaniac boastings.⁶⁴

The judge asked the jury to focus on “whether or not this publication is limited to the decency of proper controversy,” and added that the defendant “is perfectly entitled to express his opinions so long as he does so in respectful and proper language that does not outrage your feelings and the feelings of the community.”⁶⁵ It should be noted that the trial judge also identified the community with Christianity: “[i]t is part of our faith that God so loved the world that He gave

⁶¹ Ibid, 221.

⁶² Ibid, 221-222.

⁶³ Ibid, 222.

⁶⁴ Ibid, 224.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 224.

His only begotten Son,” and highlighted the importance that the Bible itself has to “our country” in his address to the jury: “We look upon the Bible as the basis of every good law in our country. It is to us the dearest and most precious book in all the world.”⁶⁶ The defendant was found guilty and sentenced to 60 days in prison. His appeal was dismissed by the Supreme Court of Ontario.

2.1.3.4 *R. v. St. Martin*

In the 1933 case of *R. v. St. Martin*, the defendant was prosecuted for publishing newspaper articles in Quebec that attacked the Catholic Church’s charity work with the poor. The author called those who distribute alms to the poor “barbaric hypocrites, utter thieves, and shameless criminals,” who use religion to “exploit credulity, fear, hope, ignorance, and their kind.”⁶⁷ In this case the judge rejected a narrow definition of blasphemy, and defined it to include “religious subjects” which itself includes “all persons or sacred objects.” An attack on the priesthood, the church (in this case Catholic) and the actions of the church (in this case charity, which is a “theological virtue”⁶⁸) are considered acts of blasphemy. The defendant was declared guilty and sentenced to pay a \$100 fine and two \$500 bonds.

While the judge in *Kinler* may have seen criticism of Catholic charity work to be salacious, since it did not constitute an attack on the divinity it would have been dismissed, yet the judge in *St. Martin* opened the scope of blasphemy to include any criticism of the church, or more specifically, the Catholicism.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 224. See footnote.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 225.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 226.

2.1.3.5 *R. v. Rahard*

The last prosecution for blasphemous libel occurred in Quebec in 1936. The case, *R. v. Rahard*, revolved around an Anglican minister's decision to post sermons on the wall of his church that criticized Catholicism. One poster said:

Judas sold Christ but did not kill Him, the priests attempted to sell Him and immolate Him. Judas sold Christ for a large sum of money; the Roman priests sell Him every day and even three times. Judas repented and threw his money away; the Roman priests do not repent and keep the money. Now what do you think of the papist religion?⁶⁹

The judge found the defendant guilty because the words he used were “offensive and injurious to the Roman Catholics,” and, notably, they “may lead to a disturbance of the public peace.”⁷⁰ The minister was fined \$100.

These five cases of prosecution show a degree of flexibility between interpretations of the law. Since blasphemy is left undefined in the criminal code, we can see how each judge's personal definition of what constitutes blasphemy is the main criteria for conviction or dismissal. On one extreme blasphemous libel covers only an insult directed at God (*Kinler*); at the other extreme it constitutes a breach of the law to insult any religious object, including religious individuals and acts (*St. Martin*). Criticism from one Christian denomination of another has also led to conviction since it related to keeping the peace of the public (*Rahard*), and another judge felt blasphemous material was capable of destroying faith (*Pelletier*). It is notable that there does seem to be agreement on the importance of Christianity to the country itself, and this importance is used to give legitimacy to the law against blasphemy. One judge stressed that the Bible was the foundation of Canadian law (*Sherry*). Another maintained that a Canadian pen was incapable of “producing such obscenities” (*Pelletier*).

⁶⁹ Ibid, 227.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 228.

Atheism in and of itself was not illegal, but the expression of atheism, or atheist beliefs, through the criticism of Christianity and the Bible, was, in essence, against the law. Although two of the defendants were not atheists, three possibly were, so the most we can say is that between 1892 and 1936 there were three convictions with sentences ranging from a \$100 fine to 60 days in prison which were *possibly* against atheists for expressing their atheist-related opinions.

Since the law is still in effect, atheists can still potentially be charged if they speak indecently of God, although the law has not been used since 1935 and it would likely not survive the legal invocation of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms (which includes the rights to freedom of religion and freedom of expression), from the Constitution Act 1982, as a defense.

The next notable legal case involving atheists occurred in the mid-1960's, when an atheist couple, Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma, were refused citizenship on the bases of their atheism, and subsequently found themselves at the centre of a highly publicized national debate.

2.1.4 The Case of Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma

A suitable introduction to the case of atheist immigrants Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma and their legal battle(s) for Canadian citizenship comes from the pages of the *Ottawa Citizen*, in an article dated April 2, 1965:

Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma live on a small southern Ontario farm. They are quiet, industrious and honest folk such as many would regard as ideal citizens.

But they are neither citizens nor, as the law now stands, are they ideally suited to be. Mr. and Mrs. Bergsma, of Caledonia, 14 miles south of here, are atheists and because of this the law says they cannot become naturalized Canadians.

They don't relish the controversy that now centres on them but they want to be Canadian citizens and in this they have the federal government as an ally. It has promised to aid their fight in the courts and alter the law if necessary.⁷¹

⁷¹ "Couple's plea: Has Canada No Room for Atheist Citizens?" *Ottawa Citizen*, April 2, 1965, 7.

On April 3, 1963, the Bergsma's, immigrants from the Netherlands who had been living in Canada for eight years, were informed that their applications for citizenship were denied because their open acknowledgment of being atheists demonstrated that they were not of good character, and they could not honestly comply with the oath of allegiance. This oath read as follows:

I ... swear that I will be faithful and bear true allegiance to Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, her heirs and successors, according to the law, and that I will faithfully observe the laws of Canada and fulfill my duties as a Canadian citizen, so help me God.⁷²

It was the inability to genuinely appeal to God, since one cannot genuinely appeal to a god of whom one does not believe, that Judge Leach took issue with, and he explained to the couple how important Christianity was to Canada:

The things we believe in, in this country, stand for Christianity... being honest and being kind... believing in Christ's teachings. [...] Not everybody follows this, but that is what we try to attain in this country, the Christian way of life. I feel you must have some kind of faith, but you don't seem to believe in anything from what I can gather... As I understand from your evidence, you have no religion at all.⁷³

The judge found the Bergsmas lack of faith and religion problematic. Due to the publicity this case garnered, it was subsequently reported that in previous cases judges permitted atheist citizenship applicants to omit the reference to God while making their affirmation, and Judge Leach's denying of the Bergsma's citizenship came across as a surprise to many, if not most, politicians and citizens.

The quote from the article by the *Ottawa Citizen* that introduced this section also included a picture of Mr. Bergsma above the caption, "Didn't want fuss." The portrayal of the couple, in these opening paragraphs as well as the remainder of the article, is flattering and positive. It notes that although Mr. Bergsma does not believe "everything in the Bible", the book does provide "him with a set of moral ethics by which to live and raise a family." It notes the

⁷² George Bain, "Freedom of Religion?" *The Globe and Mail*, September 21, 1964, 7.

⁷³ "Supreme Court Judge Upholds Denial of Citizenship to Atheists," *The Globe and Mail*, March 18, 1965, 1.

support of Liberal Citizenship minister John Nicholson and New Democratic Party member William Howe,⁷⁴ how 95% of letter writers supported the couple, and that Reverend J.R. Hord, “secretary of the United Church’s board of evangelism and social service [...] said that freedom to believe presupposes freedom to disbelieve.”⁷⁵ This supportive tone toward the couple from the *Ottawa Citizen* is not unique, news articles about this case in the *Globe and Mail* and the *Toronto Daily Star* (later renamed the *Toronto Star*) also focussed on voices that supported them in their bid to change the law to make Canadian citizenship accessible to openly atheist immigrants. Moreover, editorials were consistently in favour of granting citizenship to atheists. George Bain, of the *Globe and Mail*, for example, criticized the law in defense of the right of atheists to become citizens in a rather blunt editorial:

The case of Ernest Bergsmas’ application for citizenship, which was turned down because he was an atheist – a word unknown to him in English before he was called one – is one to add lustre to the proposition that the law is an ass.⁷⁶

J. A. Davidson, a United Church minister from Kingston, articulated what he felt was the predominant Christian attitude when he asked, rhetorically, in an opinion column:

Can you think of any good reason why the Bergsmas should be required to take an oath implying belief in God before they can receive Canadian citizenship? Surely the time has come to take steps to ensure that persons such as the Bergsmas can, with dignity and without harassment, take solemn oaths which do not imply a belief in God.⁷⁷

As noted above, letters of support were also written (not just to newspapers, but also to the Department of Citizenship and Immigration), some of which were penned by concerned non-Christian or non-believing citizenship applicants, while others came from “persons already

⁷⁴ Howe’s riding at the time was Hamilton South (Hamilton is 10km north of Caledonia).

⁷⁵ Couple’s

⁷⁶ Bain, 7

⁷⁷ J. A. Davidson, “Religion: God and the right to attain citizenship,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 27, 1965, 9.

holding Canadian citizenship, some of them born here, who have said that they do not believe in God.”⁷⁸

It is clear from both statements to the media and comments in the House of Commons by the head of the department surrounding this controversy, John Nicholson, that he had no intention of calling into question the suitability of atheists for citizenship, but rather, he seems to have found the Bergsma’s case at times ridiculous and frustrating, and the legal expenses for their defence in the Ontario Court of Appeal – and the right for atheists in general to become citizens – worthy of public funding. On March 30, 1965, Nicholson addressed this matter directly in the House of Commons (reproduced here in full since it comprehensively summarizes the government’s official opinions and response to this case):

Mr. Speaker, in view of the important principle involved in the Bergsma case and of the question asked a few days ago in the house by the hon. member for Hamilton South, I should like to make a short statement on the government’s intentions with respect to Mr. and Mrs. Bergsma, the couple who were recently refused citizenship by a judge of the citizenship court, His Honor Judge Leach.

Hon. members are aware that on March 17, Mr. Justice Schatz of the High Court of Ontario pronounced a judgement confirming the decision of the citizenship court judge. My immediate predecessor in office and the Minister of Justice, and more recently my parliamentary secretary, have told the house of the Government’s concern over this particular case, and have predicted the introduction, if found necessary, of amendments to the Canadian Citizenship Act with a view to correcting the situation.

With all due respect for the opinions of the two judges mentioned, both my department and I are concerned about the soundness of the original decision and the judgement of the high court confirming it. We had not thought that the Citizenship Act could be interpreted in the way it has now been interpreted. As a matter of fact I am informed that several citizenship court judges have permitted applicants to affirm rather than require them to swear the oath of allegiance.

The Attorney General of Canada feels that the legal question involved should be settled by a court of final resort. It seems less than reasonable that Mr. and Mrs. Bergsma should be required to bear the legal costs of contesting a decision on an aspect of the legislation with which the Government is not in agreement and which, if sustained, we intend to ask parliament to change. I am sure, therefore, that hon. members will be pleased to learn that the Crown intends to pay the reasonable costs to Mr. and Mrs. Bergsma of pursuing this matter in the courts; and their legal advisor, Mr. Ian G. Scott of Toronto, is being or has been advised accordingly.⁷⁹

Here Nicholson is clear that the government did not expect the Citizenship Act to be used to reject atheists, atheists had been granted citizenship in the past, and the government was in full

⁷⁸ George Bain, “The Supremacy of God?” *The Globe and Mail*, October 8, 1964, 7.

⁷⁹ *House of Commons Debates*, 26th Parliament, 2nd Session: Vol. 12, 12935-12936.

support of the Bergsma's pursuit of citizenship through the courts. They even offered to pay the couples legal costs. Tommy Douglas, Leader of the New Democratic Party and a Baptist minister, spoke after Nicholson, applauding the government's support of the Bergsmas:

I would like to congratulate the minister on the announcement he has just made. I am sure all hon. members have been perturbed by the court decisions to which he has referred. It was felt that either the government should immediately introduce amendments to rectify the situation or pursue the course which the minister has just outlined. I think the country generally will applaud the minister's decision to meet the necessary costs that the Bergsmas may incur if this case is finally decided in the highest court of the land. It seems to me if we are going to have a country in which there is religious freedom, that religious freedom should extend to people who may have views which differ from those of the majority of Canadians. I think the minister has followed a very wise course, and I offer him my heartiest commendation.⁸⁰

Besides congratulating the minister on his announcement of moral and financial support for the Bergsmas, Douglas also mentioned his belief that public opinion was on their side, and that he considered this to be a case of religious freedom.

After much media attention, on July 22, 1965, the Ontario Court of Appeal – in a unanimous decision – ruled that “lack of religious belief alone is not a ground upon which a citizenship court should decide against an application for citizenship,” and that Mr. and Mrs. Bergsma should be deemed “desirable persons” who can take the oath of citizenship with an affirmation of allegiance rather than swearing an oath to God.⁸¹ They became citizens on October 4, 1965.⁸²

Only one day after the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled in favour of the Bergsmas, another couple, Mr. and Mrs. Vanderpol, were denied citizenship in a Victoria, British Columbia, courtroom for refusing to take the oath of citizenship on a Bible. This Dutch couple were self-proclaimed atheists; the judge behind this judgement expressly sympathized with the Vanderpols, calling the law “ridiculous” and suggesting that Parliament should change the

⁸⁰ Ibid., 12936.

⁸¹ Frank Adams, “Clapping Bergsmas Hail News They Can Become Canadians,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 23, 1965, 1.

⁸² Frank Adams, “Award Dutch Family Citizenship Papers Without Taking Oath,” *The Globe and Mail*, October 5, 1965, 35.

Citizenship Act, but he nonetheless felt he had no choice in the matter: “Unfortunately I must administer that law.”⁸³ A “Citizenship Department official” was quick to tell the press that “Most courts have been instructed” to allow atheist or non-Christian applicants “to make an affirmation of allegiance if they do not want to take an oath on the Bible.”⁸⁴ By August 11, 1965, the couple told the media that they had received “dozens of letters and telephone calls” with only one of them openly hostile and the majority in support of changing the Citizenship Act.⁸⁵

In an interview with the *Globe and Mail* published on August 20 of that year, Nicholson addressed the Vanderpol case by explaining that the British Columbian judge had yet to view the Ontario Court of Appeals reasoning and ruling, and that he hoped the judge would be convinced to change his mind once he read the judgment, which Nicholson’s department had sent to him.⁸⁶

Nicholson remarked:

I would rather feel that our law is not discriminatory and that the courts of final resort have said so, rather than to bring in change. But if it is going to work undue hardships, then I know that the Government is prepared to amend it if necessary, or, I should say, is prepared to recommend to Parliament that it change it if necessary.⁸⁷

Highlighting the precedent set by the Bergsma case, and mentioning an already prepared certificate, on November 3, 1965, Nicholson offered the Vanerpols citizenship without the stipulation that they would have to swear an oath to God or swear their allegiance on a Bible.⁸⁸

The British Columbian judge who had initially rejected the Vanderpols’ application for citizenship “watched from the gallery”, as they were sworn in shortly thereafter in Ottawa.⁸⁹

⁸³ “Judge Sympathizes: Dutch Atheist Couple Refused Citizenship,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 26, 1965, 8.

⁸⁴ “Loyalty Affirmation Enough, Official Says,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 27, 1965, 25.

⁸⁵ “Letters Back Oath Refusal, Vanderpols Say,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 11, 1965, 23.

⁸⁶ “Atheists sworn in: Changes promised in citizenship act,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 27, 1965, 11.

⁸⁷ “Canada: in search of a population,” *The Globe and Mail*, August 20, 1965, 7.

⁸⁸ “Nicholson cites Ontario case: Citizenship offered to atheists,” *The Globe and Mail*, November 4, 1965, 11.

⁸⁹ “Atheists sworn,” They were sworn in on November 26, 1965.

Following the precedent set by the highly publicised Bergsma case, and its reaffirmation by the Vanerpols case, there does not seem to be any more incidents of atheists being rejected from obtaining Canadian citizenship strictly from their refusal to either hide their atheism or lie during an oath about their religious beliefs. What is most noteworthy about these cases is the extent of public support for atheist immigrants who wanted to become Canadian citizens. They received moral support from letter-writing citizens of both the religious and the nonreligious variety as well as newspaper editorialists, and they received moral, legal, and monetary support from the federal government.

The Bergsma case also demonstrates how we should not read history from a headline. If one does not research the actual story one could easily be left with the false ‘tagline’ impression that ‘Canada’ kept the Bergsma’s from becoming citizens, which would assumedly point to a Canadian culture of exclusivism or bigotry toward atheists in the middle of the last century. By researching the story it becomes clear that this was instead a case of a legal technicality – not the result of a culture of bigotry against atheist immigrants. The Bergsma’s did not have to falsify a belief in God or apologize for their disbelief; they found support from political and religious actors and organizations, as well as the general public.

2.1.5 Summary

The above sections offer a snapshot that, when taken together, reveals a picture of the role of atheism in Canada from a historical perspective. From Canada’s founding debates there was at least some political will behind the notion of religious tolerance, although that tolerance usually did not extend past Christianity, at least in any meaningful, or non-problematic, sense. Atheism, while not a topic of national discourse, may have been socially unacceptable (and

presumably was) but was nonetheless legal, yet the law against blasphemous libel demonstrates that expressing atheistic beliefs or opinions was considered a matter worthy of trial. The fact that the law was only used five times, with a relatively minor rate and degree of punishment, also shows either a societal willingness not to forward complaints, a lack of material/incidents worthy of complaints, the discretion of law enforcement in conjunction with a desire not to pursue prosecution under this charge, or an amalgamation of all of these factors. This would, of course, be little comfort to those whose lives were uprooted after having been charged with a Criminal Code offence, but it does point to a lack of desire to root out atheists, which can be understood as due to a lack of Canadian atheists, a lack of concern that there are Canadian atheists, or a lack of Canadian atheists wanting – and/or willing – to publish provocative (or activist) materials.

The immigration case of Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma, two atheists originally from the Netherlands, attests to a Canadian willingness to at least tolerate atheists, if not outright welcome them as Canadians. Taken at face value, the headline that a judge deemed them inadmissible for Canadian citizenship in 1963 would point to a Canada unwelcoming of atheist immigrants, but by examining the particulars of their case it becomes clear that they received overwhelming support from journalists, citizen letter writers, religious groups, and ultimately Parliament. The case proved not to be a widespread desire to keep atheists out of Canada, but a technicality that was eventually resolved.

We now turn to a discussion of the current roles, actions, and spaces, of atheism in Canada.

2.2 Contemporary

As any federal politician could tell you, Canadian voting blocks are regionally and provincially dependant; regional and provincial interests absolutely *do* affect how Canadians vote. It is not within the scope of this thesis to conduct a detailed analysis of the differences between regions and provinces with regard to religion and atheism, although this would certainly be an interesting and worthwhile pursuit. It is important, however, to garner at least a basic understanding of how religion and atheism are addressed in the political arena. By analysing the federal government in this area we can gauge how the practices and discourse surrounding religion and atheism are comprehended and expressed by federal politicians, those who, in essence, have a job-protecting duty to balance local concerns with national-party convention.

Following an analysis of the federal government's traditional use of religion and contemporary discourse on atheism, this section discusses: the demography of atheism in Canada; the most prominent atheist organizations in Canada; legal matters involving atheist activists, such as the removal of prayer from public schools and town council meetings; the treatment of atheism in the mainstream news media, both positive and negative; the legal and social responses to the 2009 atheist bus campaign; and atheism as it relates to Canadian multiculturalism.

2.2.1 Federal

References to theism can be found throughout the Canadian political landscape. The National Anthem contains the lyric "God keep our land glorious and free!" and the Constitution act of 1982 begins with the phrase, "Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize

the supremacy of God and the rule of law.”⁹⁰ Daily proceedings in the House of Commons and the Senate begin with prayers.⁹¹ Even the Speeches from the Throne, which outline the federal government’s upcoming agenda, occasionally contain references to divinity. The 2010 Speech from the Throne had a clear expression of the underlying religious nature – or normative religiosity – of “official” Canadian identity when Governor General Michaëlle Jean, tasked with reading the government-penned speech, addressed the members of parliament with “[a]s you set about this vital work, I pray that Divine Providence guide you in your deliberations.”⁹² Although Canada prides itself as being multicultural and inclusive, the federal government nonetheless includes many instances whereby elements of an exclusively monotheistic religion, either

⁹⁰ Bruce Ryder argues that “The preamble’s references to the ‘supremacy of God’ and the ‘rule of law’ express a form of reconciliation between the secular nature of the state and the importance of protecting religious belief and practice. They underline the fact that the state is secular and must be neutral between religions, but that it should also nurture and protect religious expression.” (Bruce Ryder, 2005, “State Neutrality and Freedom of Conscience and Religion,” *Supreme Court Law Review*, 28: 169-199, 177.) While that is an interesting interpretation it is one that originated in hindsight. Trudeau, who implemented the Charter, included the preamble because of pressure from religious interest groups, not to reconcile state secularism and religious neutrality. If he had his way the preamble would not have mentioned God, as he told the Liberal Caucus in April 1981: “I don’t think God gives a damn whether he’s in the constitution or not.” See George Egerton, “Trudeau, God, and the Canadian Constitution: Religion, Human Rights, and Governmental Authority in the Making of the 1982 Constitution,” in David Lyon and Marguerite Van Die (Eds.), *Rethinking Church, State, and Modernity: Canada Between Europe and America*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000, 90-112.

⁹¹ According to the House of Commons website (“Typical Sitting Day: Prayers,” http://www.parl.gc.ca/About/House/compendium/web-content/c_d_prayers-e.htm, House of Commons, *Government of Canada*, accessed Feb 23, 2014.): “Before the doors of the Chamber are opened to the public at the beginning of each sitting of the House, the Speaker takes the Chair and reads the prayer before any business is considered. While the prayer is being read, the Speaker, the Members and the Table Officers all stand. The text of the prayer is as follows: *Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy. We pray for our Sovereign, Queen Elizabeth, and the Governor General. Guide us in our deliberations as Members of Parliament, and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities as Members. Grant us wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to preserve the blessings of this country for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.* The prayer is followed by a moment of silence for private reflection and meditation. At the end of the moment of silence, the Speaker orders the doors opened, and the proceedings of the House begin. At this point, television coverage of the proceedings commences and Members’ guests and the public enter the visitors’ galleries.” Emphasis in original.

⁹² “Speech from the Throne to open the Third Session Fortieth Parliament of Canada” <http://www.parl.gc.ca/Parlinfo/Documents/ThroneSpeech/40-3-e.html>, *Parliament of Canada*, March 3, 2010, accessed October 30, 2013. Interestingly, the speech also included the line, “Our Government will also ask Parliament to examine the original gender-neutral English wording of the national anthem.” This sparked heated debate about whether or not the line “True patriot love in all thy sons command,” should be changed to be more gender-inclusive. The possibility that the anthem’s lyrics were to be altered piqued the interest of some atheists who asked that the line mentioning God (“God keep our land glorious and free!”) also be altered so as to remove any mention of God. In the end the government dropped the notion of changing the anthem, likely due to public backlash – it was seen as silly, a diversion from more important matters, and an affront to tradition.

historically or contemporarily inserted, are present. If this institutional inclusion of religion, particularly Christianity, is often taken for granted as overlooked tradition, then there are also times when religion is perceived as interconnected to politicians who are subsequently penalized by the public for acting in a fashion popularly considered counter-intuitive to their elected positions.

Canada has neither a legally established nor a constitutional separation of church and state. It would be misleading, however, to treat the subject of the nation's "official" religiosity as clear-cut and static. As Bruce Ryder explains:

While religion has always been a significant force in Canadian public life, the relationship between religious and state authority has changed profoundly. An explicit or implicit alliance between state norms and the teachings of the dominant Christian religions, long taken for granted, has been steadily challenged, especially in the last half century. The state is now conceived, in popular and constitutional discourses, as officially secular yet supportive of religious pluralism and multiculturalism.⁹³

While Canada is certainly currently conceived of as pluralistic and multicultural, the religious references in state matters nonetheless remain Christian in origin. Yet, just as there are numerous examples of how Canada can be seen as a Christian country, there are also examples which can be used to make the opposite point, that Canada, specifically in terms of governance, 'acts' as secular. Unlike the United States, whose constitution holds a strict separation of church and state but whose politicians find it to be politically useful to cite their personal faiths or refer to God in speeches, Canada has no constitutional separation of church and state yet it appears to be politically disastrous to identify too openly as a person of faith. On one hand the Prime Minister is expected to sing along with the God-invoking National Anthem, yet on the other the Prime Minister is heavily criticized by the media if he or she says "God bless Canada." The evangelical vote aside, being overtly religious is, as a well-known rule, a negative attribute to have as a Canadian politician. Richard Albert, senior research fellow at the Canadian Council

⁹³ Ryder, 169.

for Democracy, provides a few of the more popular recent examples in an article for *The Hill Times* explaining why Prime Minister Stephen Harper stopped ending his speeches with the phrase “God bless Canada” before the federal election of 2008:

Canadian politicians have long paid a dear price for invoking their religious beliefs. Stockwell Day, for example, was attacked by the left in the 2000 federal election for wearing his religious convictions on his sleeve. In 2006, Liberal MP John McKay’s religious-based opposition to same-sex marriage nearly got him expelled from the party caucus. Recently, Ontario Progressive-Conservative leader John Tory lost the 2007 provincial election largely for proposing to give public funding to religious schools. And most recently, Conservative MP Gary Goodyear’s comments on the evolution-creation debate attracted fierce criticism from the left and the scientific community.⁹⁴

We can see a dichotomy at play in terms of Canada’s official (institutional) religious character: on one hand the state’s legal documents and proceedings include elements of Christianity yet on the other hand agents of the state are expected to conduct their roles⁹⁵ in a secular fashion.

One exceptional but noteworthy example of this dichotomy is that witnesses are asked to swear on a Bible in court (unless they opt to swear or affirm through other means), yet in this same environment – a courtroom – a judge in 2012 told a Christian defendant that her God is wrong.⁹⁶ The judge, of course, was not expected to make such a claim, nor would the judge have been expected to state the opposite, that the defendant’s God was right. Judges are expected in contemporary Canada to remain religiously neutral while behind the bench; they are certainly not expected to profess theology. The judge in this rare instance was later criticized by another judge in an Ontario Superior Court appeal judgment, (“a number of comments made by the trial judge during the course of the sentencing hearing in this case were ill-advised and

⁹⁴ Richard Albert, “Why you don’t hear Harper say ‘God bless Canada’ anymore,” <http://www.hilltimes.com/opinion-piece/opinion/2009/11/09/why-you-dont-hear-harper-say-god-bless-canada-anymore/22733>, *The Hill Times Online*, November 9, 2009, accessed August 20, 2013.

⁹⁵ While the distinction between what is public and what is personal life is, with exceptions, rather simple to make for bureaucrats, for politicians this distinction is much more difficult to define.

⁹⁶ The *National Post* reports the Judge’s words, which were said in court on March 21 and were directed to an antiabortion/pro-life activist, as follows: “If you think that you have some higher moral authority that allows you to break [the] rule of law, that allows you to go to that clinic, to allow you to disregard the rights of other people to use that clinic, to disrespect those people, then you are wrong, and your God is wrong, because no God would tolerate that.” Sarah Boseveld, “‘Your God is wrong’: Anti-abortion activist to appeal conviction, saying judge attacked religion,” *National Post*, July 7, 2012, <http://news.nationalpost.com/2012/06/07/your-gods-wrong-anti-abortion-activist-to-appeal-conviction-saying-judge-attacked-religion/>, accessed August 3, 2012.

inappropriate⁹⁷), but it is worth briefly comparing this incident with the previously mentioned case of a judge telling a jury in 1926 that the Bible is “the basis of every good law in our country.” It is just as difficult to conceive of a judge in 1926 telling a Christian defendant that her God is wrong as it is for a judge in 2012 to tell a jury that the Bible is the basis of every good law in Canada. This brief reflection on social expectations with regard to the role of Christianity in the legal realm aside, the religious-secular dichotomy is certainly evident in areas of governmental institutions, from Parliament Hill to local courtrooms, and this dichotomy may help explain why some people believe Canada to be an intrinsically Christian country while others believe that it has become ‘too’ secular.

Although politics is not the only measure of a nation’s religiosity, or secularity, political rhetoric is one measure that often informs national debate and identity. Another measure is legal cases and judgments, which are technically separate from politics but often inform and occasionally negate political decisions. Politicians and judges both contribute to the construction of national discourse, laws, and the citizenry’s sense of national identity. By citing Christian elements in the Canadian political and legal apparatuses, a case can be made that Canada is a Christian country. A case can also be made, however, by citing media reactions to politicians’ mentioning of their own religiosities, and the subsequent desire for politicians to avoid coming across as overtly religious, to argue that Canada is a secular country. In essence those who argue either side are both right and wrong to various degrees since the role of religion in politics is more nuanced than a simple ‘all or nothing’ phenomenon, and those degrees are certainly contentious, which explains why one should expect disagreement on the place or role of atheism. A fundamentalist Christian, for instance, can look at and cite Canada’s acceptance of gay

⁹⁷ *R. v. Wagner*, 2012 ONSC 5461, April 27, 2012, Ontario Superior Court of Judgement, paragraph 5.[31]. Interestingly, the lack of media coverage on this event is itself telling, since the obvious conclusion is that a story about a Judge being biased against Christianity is viewed by most journalists as being of little public interest.

marriage and abortion and argue that Canada is not a Christian nation, whereas an atheist can point to the National Anthem and the continued funding of Catholic schools and state the exact opposite, and these opinions will inform how one group sees and understands one's own role and the role of the 'other'.

Atheism as a subject or a topic does not come up often in governmental dealings, but two recent speeches provide some insight into its inclusion or exclusion from policies pertaining to religion. Both of these speeches are on the subject of the government of Canada's Office of Religious Freedom. This office was officially opened on February 19, 2013 and fell under the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada.⁹⁸ The office's mandate is to: "protect, and advocate on behalf of, religious minorities under threat; oppose religious hatred and intolerance; and promote Canadian values of pluralism and tolerance abroad."⁹⁹ With regard to this mandate, the question of atheism – whether atheists are included or excluded as a religious minority – has been addressed by both the minister in charge of the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada when it was established, and the office's first appointed ambassador.

In a speech streamed via video to "an event co-hosted by Canada on the margins of the United Nations General Assembly" on September 26, 2012, Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird, speaking on the subject of Canada's international support for pluralism and religious freedom, made the following comments about atheism:

Time and time again, Canada has spoken out against discrimination, and violations of freedom, including freedom of religion.

We don't see agnosticism or atheism as being in need of defense in the same way persecuted religious minorities are.

We speak of the right to worship and practice in peace, not the right to stay away from places of worship.

⁹⁸ In late 2015, following a federal election and a change of government, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada had its name changed to Global Affairs Canada.

⁹⁹ "Canada's Office of Religious Freedom," http://www.international.gc.ca/religious_freedom-liberte_de_religion/index.aspx?lang=eng, *Global Affairs Canada*, accessed March 10, 2016.

That is indeed a choice any or all are free to make for personal reasons.
We speak of the right to be free of oppressive forms of extremism in favour of the rule of law for all.¹⁰⁰

These points arguably speak more to what Baird considers the status of atheism to be in Canada rather than the international situation, yet the speech was made to an international audience about the creation of the Office of Religious Freedom, so it does call into question if Baird was aware of the persecution atheists face in many countries. Political rhetoric speaks to the thoughts and priorities of some of a country's most important decision makers, and as such should be taken seriously. In the case of Baird, does he actually define atheists and agnostics as simply being those who express "the right to stay away from places of worship"; is the claim that this "right" or ability "is indeed a choice any or all are free to make" something he believes extends globally or is limited to liberal democracies? Putting aside what this may mean about Baird's understanding of atheism around the world, it is clear that he sees atheists, at least in Canada, as not being in need of protection from "discrimination, and violations of freedom", and he differentiates atheists from "persecuted religious minorities." Atheism, according to this speech, is not included as a religious freedom.

On the other hand, on May 10, 2013, Andrew Bennett, the Ambassador of the Office of Religious Freedom, speaking at a Holocaust remembrance conference in Ottawa, said that religious freedom includes "the freedom to hold no religious beliefs."¹⁰¹ Bennett has also held at least one meeting with Centre for Inquiry Canada, discussing the persecution of atheists in

¹⁰⁰ "Canada Reiterates Commitment to Religious Freedom,"

http://www.international.gc.ca/ministers-ministres/baird_religion_sept_2012.aspx?lang=eng&view=d, Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, *Government of Canada*, September 26, 2012, accessed August 20, 2013.

¹⁰¹ "Zelikovitz Centre hosts Holocaust Conference: Dr. Andrew Bennett,"

http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oB1QgbLTst0#!, *You Tube*, posted September 3, 2013, by Carleton University, accessed October 30, 2013. Interestingly, in this speech he also mentioned how his own religious beliefs relate to his role as ambassador of the Office of Religious Freedom: "I believe, myself very passionately, that human dignity is central to the message of freedom of religion, all of us are created in the image and likeness of God [...]."

various international settings.¹⁰² This tells us that even within the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development Canada there was contradiction on the status of atheism. To Baird, atheists are not in need of “defense;” to Bennett atheism is included as protected under the umbrella of “religious freedom” and he is engaged in dialogue with at least one atheist community.

It is worth pointing out that atheism is ‘somewhat’ or ‘by extension’ acknowledged in Canada’s most recent citizenship guide. In Citizenship and Immigration Canada’s current (as of 2013) citizenship study guide, *Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship*, the Canadian government makes a point of mentioning the “no religion” category of religious affiliation, which includes atheists, under the heading “Diversity in Canada”:

The great majority of Canadians identify as Christians. The largest religious affiliation is Catholic, followed by various Protestant churches. The numbers of Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and members of other religions, as well as people who state “no religion” are also growing.¹⁰³

This shows recognition of those who do not identify with a religion, and, significantly, this section uses diversity of religious affiliation, spoken languages, and sexual orientation, as examples of what is included under the term ‘multiculturalism’, stating, “Together, these diverse groups, sharing a common Canadian identity, make up today’s multicultural society.”¹⁰⁴ According to this study guide, ‘no religion’, which includes atheism, is a group which makes up “today’s multicultural society.” Indeed, as considered a group under the trait of religious affiliation, those with no religion are certainly growing, as the guide points out to potential new

¹⁰² “CFI Petitions the Office of Religious Freedom,” <http://canadianatheist.com/2013/04/12/cfi-petitions-the-office-of-religious-freedom/>, *Canadian Atheist*, April 12, 2013, accessed Oct 31, 2013.

¹⁰³ See page 13 of PDF, 3.72 MB (to distinguish it from the large print version), of: “Discover Canada: The Rights and Responsibilities of Citizenship: Study Guide,” <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/resources/publications/discover/read.asp>, Citizenship and Immigration Canada, *Government of Canada*, accessed December 12, 2013.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid

Canadian citizens. In fact, ‘religious nones’ is the fastest growing ‘religious’ category in Canada.

2.2.2 Demography

Demographically, Statistics Canada data reveals that 23.9% of Canadians self-identify as ‘nones’ when asked to identify their religion.¹⁰⁵ This is an increase from 12% in 1991 and 16% in 2001. The 2004 Statistics Canada General Social Survey found that 23% of Canadians between 15-29 years of age identify as having no religious affiliation.¹⁰⁶ To put this into perspective, the 2011 Statistics Canada National Household Survey found that “two-thirds of Canada's population (67.3%), reported that they were affiliated with a Christian religion,” and 8.2% reported affiliation with religions other than Christianity; this latter statistic collectively includes Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism, Buddhism, and Judaism, ordered according to percentage from highest to lowest.¹⁰⁷ Religious ‘nones’ have increased from 12% to 23.9% in twenty years – 0.1% short of doubling. It is important to note that Statistics Canada does not document how many Canadians self-identify in more than one category, such as Jewish atheists, or ‘culturally Catholic’ agnostics, for example, so these statistics, while useful for showing basic trends, do not in and of themselves tell the whole story.

¹⁰⁵ “The Daily – 2011 National Household Survey: Immigration, place of birth, citizenship, ethnic origin, visible minorities, language and religion,” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/130508/dq130508b-eng.htm>, *Statistics Canada*, May 8, 2013, accessed June 4, 2013.

¹⁰⁶ “Young adults are the most likely to have no religious affiliation,” <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/pub/11-008-x/2006001/c-g/4097582-eng.htm>, *Statistics Canada*, 2004 General Social Survey, chart, accessed February 22, 2013.

¹⁰⁷ “The Daily”. Immigration has increased these numbers, while immigration has also increased the numbers of religious nones: “16.0% of immigrants who came before 1971 had no religious affiliation, compared with 22.0% among those who came between 2001 and 2005, and 19.5% among those who came between 2006 and 2011.”

2.2.3 Atheist Organizations

As with any group, atheists, agnostics, skeptics, secularists, freethinkers, and non-believers by any other name may seek community with those who have similar interests, be it a shared activity, activism, or simply companionship. In fact, since the nineteenth century, atheists have been engaged with two separate (but occasionally overlapping) types of organizations: those with a scientific focus and those with a humanistic focus. As Stephen LeDrew explains:

In scientific atheism non-believers focused their engagement with religion on science, explanation and knowledge vs. ignorance; in this view religion could be eradicated with scientific critique and education. In humanistic atheism the focus turned to religion as a social phenomenon and a symptom of alienation and oppression; in this view the answer to the social problem of religion was to be found in the broader problem of human suffering: if these could be eradicated religion would disappear.¹⁰⁸

The organizations with the largest profiles in Canada are the Centre For Inquiry Canada and Humanist Canada, both of which are major organizations with many affiliate organizations or branch groups across Canada. Since these are the ‘main’ organizations, it is worth briefly addressing each one in terms of its history, scope, and agenda(s), as well as how each represents one of LeDrew’s two streams of atheist thought or focus: scientific atheism and humanistic atheism.

2.2.3.1 Centre for Inquiry Canada

According to its official website, Centre for Inquiry Canada traces its roots from “a small Atheist Society [which] began under the leadership of undergraduate student Jennie Fiddes” at the University of Toronto’s Trinity College (2004). It then became the University of Toronto Secular Alliance (2005), which grew into the Toronto Secular Alliance (2006) before amalgamating with The Humanist Association of Toronto to create the Secular Freethought

¹⁰⁸ Stephen LeDrew, 2012, “The Evolution of Atheism: Scientific and Humanistic Approaches,” *History of the Human Science*, 25(3) 70-87, 71.

Centre (2006). This organization in turn became the Toronto affiliate of the Centre for Inquiry under the executive direction of Justin Trottier, who had been instrumental in the previous Toronto-based groups successful growth and increased media presence.¹⁰⁹

Since 2008 Centre for Inquiry Canada (CFI) has expanded nationally to establish branches in Calgary, Montreal, Vancouver, Ottawa, Edmonton, Halifax, Saskatoon, Kelowna, and Kamloops.¹¹⁰ Today it is “an independent, completely Canadian-led, highly-visible national charitable organization.”¹¹¹ CFI’s mandate is “to promote the values of reason, science and freedom of inquiry,” and they “focus on three broad areas of education and activism: 1. Religion 2. Pseudoscience, Paranormal and Fringe-science claims, 3. Medicine and Health.”¹¹² They “work to promote a scientific worldview, one that challenges established norms and customs and one that believes in the freedom of all individuals to ask important questions about life, nature and the world around them.”¹¹³

The CFI is an example of an atheist organization that takes a scientific approach to religion, following in the footsteps of the Victorian Darwinists, which, as LeDrew explains, is “constituted by [an] explanatory model of religion, as well as political liberalism and a scientific-rationalism.”¹¹⁴ As with their predecessors in the past, science is treated by the CFI as “claiming sole right to explanation of nature,” and the critique of religion is “a rejection of worldviews that [stand] in the way of legitimization and institutionalization of modern scientific methods.”¹¹⁵ In essence, CFI has as a focus the promotion of science as a worldview and is less concerned with

¹⁰⁹ “History and About,” <http://centreforinquiry.ca/about-us/history-and-mandate/>, *Centre for Inquiry Canada*, accessed December 12, 2013.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.* I listed the established branches in the same order as they are presented on this webpage, but the page does not clarify if it lists these branches are listed in order of their time of establishment.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² “About Us,” <http://centreforinquiry.ca/about-us/>, *Centre for Inquiry Canada*, accessed December 13, 2013.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ LeDrew, 77.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

replacing the social aspects of religion with secular alternatives than are other organizations that fall under the humanistic atheism umbrella.

2.2.3.2 Humanist Canada

Humanist Canada, founded in 1968, is a not-for-profit charitable organization engaged in promoting “the separation of religion from public policy and foster[ing] the development of reason, compassion and critical thinking for all Canadians through secular education and community support.”¹¹⁶ Humanist Canada traces its origins to the Humanist Fellowship of Montreal, which grew out of the “first Humanist group in Canada [which] was formed in 1954.” The first president of the Humanist Association of Canada, since renamed Humanist Canada, was Dr. Henry Morgentaler.¹¹⁷

According to the official website, Humanist Canada is a “resource for secular groups and causes across Canada,” which trains “Humanists to perform weddings, funerals, namings, and other rites of passage for the secular community.”¹¹⁸ It is based in Ottawa with branches across Canada, such as British Columbia Humanist Association and the Association Humaniste du Québec. An affiliate, Canadian Humanist Publications, publishes the quarterly journal *Humanist Perspectives*, which is Canada-focussed, Ottawa-based, and, notably, receives financial support from the Government of Canada.¹¹⁹

Humanist Canada is an example of an atheist organization that takes a humanistic approach to religion, in that they follow in the footsteps of those in the nineteenth century who

¹¹⁶ “Vision, Mission, Values,” <http://humanistcanada.ca/content/vision-mission-values>, *Humanist Canada*, accessed December 13, 2013.

¹¹⁷ Sheila Ayala, “Beginnings of Humanism,” <http://ottawa.humanists.net/beginnings-humanism>, *Humanist Association of Ottawa*, accessed December 13, 2013.

¹¹⁸ “What we do,” <http://humanistcanada.ca/content/what-we-do>, *Humanist Canada*, accessed December 13, 2013.

¹¹⁹ See: “About the Journal,” http://www.humanistperspectives.org/about_journal.html, *Humanist Perspectives*, accessed January 13, 2013; and, “Contact Us,” <http://www.humanistperspectives.org/contact.html>, *Humanist Perspectives*, accessed January 13, 2013.

were “discontent[ed] with the premise of the Enlightenment that modernity would lead to greater prosperity for all, as well as a recognition that the rationalist cognitive critique of religion did nothing to address the non-rational sources of religious belief, which include alienation, suffering, infantile neurosis and insecurity, and fear of death.”¹²⁰ This can be seen most clearly in their emphasis on replacing religious rituals by providing their own secular rites of passages, rather than promoting a scientific worldview.

2.2.4 Legal Matters – Atheist Activism

A common caricature of atheists, particularly in the United States, is that atheists are busybodies out to remove religion (usually Christianity) from public spaces. This caricature is quite evident in American media coverage of the so-called ‘War on Christmas’. Since oversimplification and exaggeration are elements of all caricatures, there is nonetheless some truth to be found in this description,¹²¹ yet all atheists are painted with the same brush. As Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann contend, “Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether.”¹²² In the American context, Madalyn Murray O’Hare, whose landmark lawsuit *Murray v. Curlett* led to a Supreme Court ruling in 1963 that Bible-readings in public schools was unconstitutional, may have helped shape this modern

¹²⁰ LeDrew, 78.

¹²¹ American Atheists, for instance, recently paid for a billboard in New York City that claims nobody needs Christ during Christmas. From their press release of December 3, 2013: “American Atheists launched a major billboard display on Tuesday that declares Christmas is better without the Christ. The huge 40’x40’ digital billboard is located in Times Square in Midtown Manhattan. Using motion graphics, the billboard proclaims, ‘Who needs Christ during Christmas?’ A hand crosses out the word ‘Christ’ and the word ‘NOBODY’ appears. The display then says ‘Celebrate the true meaning of Xmas’ and offers a series of cheery words: family, friends, charity, food, snow, and more.” “Press Release: Atheists: Nobody Needs Christ at Christmas: Times Square Billboards Urge Celebration of Family, Friends,” <http://news.atheists.org/2013/12/03/press-release-atheists-nobody-needs-christ-at-christmas/>, *American Atheists*, December 3, 2013, accessed January 22, 2014.

¹²² Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, 2006, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society.” *American Sociological Review*. 71(2): 211-234, 230.

caricature of the uncompromising atheist focussed on removing religion from the public sphere.¹²³

In the Canadian context, there are certainly some atheists who have sought legal means to remove religion from select public spaces, yet historically these atheists often worked in conjunction with members of religions on matters such as the removal of prayer in public classrooms in Canada. This is in no way meant to take away from the activism conducted by atheists in the legal arena; it is only to point out that as with any story there is a degree of nuance that should be acknowledged, and in this case the co-operation between atheists and religious minorities should not be ignored. This section addresses some of the landmark cases involving atheist activism in the legal arena. These include cases pertaining to the recitation of the Lord's Prayer in public schools; the distribution of Bibles in public schools; and the use of prayer by town councils.

2.2.4.1 Prayer and the Distribution of Bibles in Public Schools

Public school is a place where children and young adults of various ethnicities, cultural backgrounds, and religious dispositions intermingle, whether with an attitude of reciprocated respect and interest, or intolerance and self-regulated segregation. As Canada became more multicultural in both public policy and social reality, the traditional role of public schools in providing religious guidance or direction increasingly became one of contention. Beginning each morning or ending each afternoon with a school prayer, one Jewish in origins but Christian in use, called into question the role of prayer – and by extension, religion – in public schools, as well as minority and majority relations.

¹²³ As Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith explain (“Secular,” 410) even in academia “there has been little research on the organizational aspects of atheism and secular humanism in the United States, aside from treatments of the controversial figure Madelyn Murray O’Hare.”

2.2.4.1.1 *Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education*

In legal terms, the case of *Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education (1988)* revolved around whether prayer violated the “freedom of religion and conscience” clause (2a) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. The Lord’s Prayer, as it is commonly known, comes from the biblical account of the life of Jesus by Matthew (6:9-13). In the *King James Version* of the Bible, the prayer reads as follows:

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Different translations of the Bible will rephrase this passage in different ways, but in essence this is the prayer children across Canada were commonly expected to recite each school morning until it became a matter for the courts to decide. An important exception to this classroom expectation was that non-Christian children could opt out of recitation, either by staying in the classroom and not participating, or leaving the classroom during the prayer’s recital. When challenged by parents of children in Sudbury, Ontario, public schools, the question became one of the public education’s role in facilitating religious discourse (and, by extension, values), and the singling out of minorities in the classroom (and, by extension, religious discrimination).

The case that removed prayer from the classroom originated with five applicants, but by the time it reached the Supreme Court of Ontario Court of Appeal there were three remaining appellants; the religion of each was briefly addressed in the judgement:

Of the three remaining appellants one is of the Jewish religion and another is a Moslem. The third practises no religion but his wife is Roman Catholic and their children attend that church a few times a year. They decided to send their children to a public rather than a separate school in order to give them a secular education. One appellant made his objections to compulsory religious exercises known by letter to the Board but did not request an exemption from the exercises for his children although invited to do so. The

other two appellants did not object before commencing these proceedings and did not request an exemption. The three appellants stated that they had not requested an exemption for their children because they did not want them singled out from their peers because of their religious beliefs.¹²⁴

Of the three remaining appellants one practiced “no religion” but his wife was Roman Catholic and the children went to church, albeit only “a few times a year.” Whether the appellant was an atheist or not is unclear, but since the two remaining appellants are Jewish and Muslim, what is clear is that this was not simply a case of an atheist activist taking on school prayer without support; it is the case of (possibly) an atheist, in conjunction with a Jew and a Muslim, proposing that the inclusion of prayer in public school singles out their children which forces their children to choose between compromising their religious beliefs (participating in the prayer) or being singled out as religiously different (not participating). The court ultimately decided that public school prayer was an unjustified infringement of section 2(a) of the Charter, which guarantees that everyone has the fundamental freedom of conscience and religion.

2.2.4.1.2 R.C. v. District School Board of Niagara

Another issue related to public schools and atheist activism in the legal arena is the distribution of Bibles in schools. Since 1965 Gideon International Canada has distributed Bibles to grade five students at school, provided they have parental consent.¹²⁵ As a form of protest to the policy of allowing Bibles to be distributed to children in public school, in 2010, Rene Chouinard, a father of a grade five student from Grimsby, Ontario, asked the District School Board of Niagara if he could distribute the book “Just Pretend: A Freethought Book for

¹²⁴ *Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education (1988)*, Ontario Court of Appeal, September 23, 1988. See Section 1.2., fourth paragraph down.

¹²⁵ Tristin Hopper, “Atheism a creed that needs the same religious protections of Christianity and Islam: Ontario Human Rights Tribunal,” <http://life.nationalpost.com/2013/08/28/atheism-a-creed-that-needs-the-same-religious-protections-of-christianity-and-islam-ontario-human-rights-tribunal/>, *National Post*, August 28, 2013, accessed August 28, 2013.

Children,” published by the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Chouinard, an atheist,¹²⁶ believed his request would force a critique of the distribution of religious texts in schools rather than the acceptance of his offer to distribute a clearly atheistic text, as he explained in a letter to his daughter’s school council:

We believe that if non-theistic materials were distributed in an Ontario Public School that fact would set off an enormous controversy. People would insist that the Public School system is not the place for people with a religious agenda; and that is exactly our point!¹²⁷

After the school board rejected his offer, Chouinard made a formal complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission on the grounds that he was discriminated against on the basis of creed. The complaint led to the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal and a subsequent ruling.

At issue for the Tribunal to decide was whether or not the school board’s policy of allowing people to distribute select religious texts – only those noted in the Ontario Multifaith Information Manual – discriminated against those of other creeds, of which they considered atheism. The Tribunal ruled on August 13, 2013, that:

The policy was discriminatory because its definition of acceptable materials violated substantive equality by excluding the kinds of materials central to many creeds. The restriction to sacred or foundational texts excludes some creeds and is therefore discriminatory.¹²⁸

The Tribunal ordered the District School Board of Niagara to write a more inclusive policy which allows for atheist texts to be distributed, explaining that if the board

is prepared to distribute permission forms proposing the distribution of Christian texts to committed atheists, it must also be prepared to distribute permission forms proposing the distribution of atheist texts to religious Christians. It cannot design its criteria in a way that would permit communication of materials setting out their beliefs by some, but not all creeds.¹²⁹

¹²⁶ *R.C. v. District School Board of Niagara*, Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, Decisions, August 13, 2013. Paragraph [6] describes his atheism: “R. [Chouinard] describes himself as an atheist or non-theist. He rejects the idea that there is a deity of any kind and believes that the suggestion there is one is false. When asked whether his daughter is an atheist, R. noted that there is some debate about whether children are capable of having religious views, and testified that he is hesitant to label a child by her parents’ beliefs. However, R. says that anyone discussing the issue with her would conclude that S.[his daughter] is a non-believer.”

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [15].

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [68].

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [83].

In essence, due to the complaint of an atheist who sought an end to the distribution of Bibles in public school, atheism has now been deemed a creed by the Ontario Human Rights Tribunal,¹³⁰ and as such the opportunity to distribute religious or creed-related texts has been extended to those of previously overlooked minority religions and atheists.

2.2.4.2 Town Council Prayers

Atheists have been involved in court action to limit or remove religious symbols and practices from public spaces, and they have often been supported or accompanied by religious actors. This section examines some of the town council prayer legal cases that atheists have been involved with, followed by a discussion about the court rulings on the constitutionality of prayer in municipal governmental proceedings, and what the rulings say, by insinuation, about the complainants.

2.2.4.2.1 *Freitag v. Penetanguishene*

In the 1999 case of *Freitag v. Penetanguishene*, the Ontario Court of Appeal ruled that recitation of the Lord's Prayer at the beginning of town council meetings was a violation of the appellant's charter right to freedom of religion (found under s. 2(a) of *the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*), and recommended that the town council in question adopt a nondenominational prayer in substitution.

According to the court's ruling, Henry Freitag "is a non-Christian resident of the Town of Penetanguishene who is interested and active in local affairs and regularly attends Town Council

¹³⁰ Ibid., Paragraph [43]. On the matter of atheism being a creed, adjudicator David A. Wright wrote: "I conclude that a liberal and purposive interpretation of the prohibition on discrimination because of 'creed' includes atheism and that discrimination because a person is atheist is prohibited by the [*Human Rights Code*] Code."

meetings.”¹³¹ The Mayor continued the 100 year-old tradition of beginning each meeting with the Lord’s Prayer in order “to impose a Christian moral tone on the deliberations of council.”¹³² Although all parties involved acknowledge that no one was forced to stand and recite the prayer, Freitag explained that, from his perspective,

there is great pressure to do so and that, as a non-Christian, he feels intimidated and uncomfortable with the practice adopted by the Town. He also says that, although he has considered running for office, he has been deterred from doing so, as it would be contrary to his personal beliefs to be a member of a council that uses a denominational prayer as it does.¹³³

The Court of Appeal found that although the prayer was not mandatory, “when the mayor opens the Town Council meetings by inviting the councillors to rise and recite the Lord's Prayer with him, that action is governmental conduct by a government official in a government meeting”¹³⁴ and as such it is subject to the Charter. It cited the *Zylberberg v. Sudbury Board of Education* decision, and noted that “Just as children are entitled to attend public school and be free from coercion or pressure to conform to the religious practices of the majority, so everyone is entitled to attend public local council meetings and to enjoy the same freedom.”¹³⁵ The Court ultimately decided that:

As the purpose of the practice of the Town Council in opening its meetings with the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer is to impose a Christian moral tone and therefore the purpose itself infringes the appellant’s Charter right, the practice cannot be justified under s. 1. [the ‘reasonable limits clause’].¹³⁶

The ruling also recommended a potential solution:

[T]he purposes articulated by the mayor for opening the meetings of the Town Council with the Lord’s Prayer could be served, for example, by a non-denominational prayer and a moment of silence, similar to the current practice of the House of Commons.¹³⁷

¹³¹ *Freitag v. Penetanguishene (Town)*, 1999, Ontario Court of Appeal, September 23, 1999, Paragraph [1].

¹³² *Ibid.*, Paragraph [18].

¹³³ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [5].

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [12].

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [34]. See also Paragraph [38]: “The Charter guarantee of freedom of conscience and religion is not limited to children or to those who might be more vulnerable to social stigma or pressure because of their age or their stage of life. It is a right guaranteed to everyone in this country.”

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [50].

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, Paragraph [52].

This solution the Court of Appeal suggested is significant because it clearly explains that “the purposes articulated by the mayor” for opening with the Lord’s Prayer “could be served” by a non-denominational prayer. In effect having a prayer was considered constitutional so long as it was not specifically Christian.

It is important to note that in this case the appellant is known as “a non-Christian” which does not mean that he is an atheist any more than a Muslim, Buddhist, or any non-Christian religion. In fact, it is also worth noting that the judgment also mentions another “non-Christian” resident who did not take issue with the prayer:

Another resident of the Town who does not practise the Christian faith, Mr. Randy Robbins, has been a member of council since 1991. He does not feel compelled to stand when called upon by the mayor, but he chooses to stand and take a moment for silent reflection.¹³⁸

While this resident, as with Freitag, may be of another faith or no faith at all, it is worth pointing out that support or disagreement in cases such as these is not always divided along sectarian lines.

As a result of this ruling the town council began meetings with a non-denominational prayer. Freitag insisted that this new prayer still discriminated against him,¹³⁹ and since he did not participate in its recitation, also stigmatized him. The non-denominational prayer read as follows:

Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Penetanguishene and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity and peace that we enjoy.

Grant that we may be worthy custodians of all that has been entrusted to us. Help us to be concerned for what will promote good government. Guide us in our deliberations as members of Council, and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities.

¹³⁸ Ibid., Paragraph [8]

¹³⁹ *Freitag v. Penetanguishene (Town)*, 2013, Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario, Decisions, May 23, 2013. The decision in this case noted the non-importance of what his beliefs actually are in Paragraph [22]: “Whatever the applicant’s belief system, he testified that it does not include the act of praying before the opening of public council meetings nor does it include belief in the god to whom the appeal for wisdom and guidance is made in the Town Prayer. The applicant’s allegation is that he is exposed to a religious observance at the opening of council meetings which requires him to act in one of two ways: stand and observe the Town Prayer which is contrary to his beliefs, or remain seated and thereby expose to others in attendance that he is a non-believer.”

Grant us the wisdom, knowledge, will and understanding to preserve the blessings of the Town for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.¹⁴⁰

Freitag took his complaint to the Ontario Human Rights Commission and on May 23, 2013, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario ruled in his favour. Of the prayer itself, adjudicator Leslie Reaume reasoned:

If one considers impact from the perspective of a reasonable person, apprised of all of the facts, including the wording of the Town Prayer, the history which preceded it and the findings by the Ontario Court of appeal in Freitag that the purpose of reciting a prayer at the opening of council meetings was to impose a Christian moral tone on council meetings, it would be reasonable to conclude that the current Town Prayer is derived at least in part from Judeo-Christian values and beliefs. The applicant is not required, in my view, to establish that the prayer is exclusively Judeo-Christian in order to claim that as a non-Christian, he is negatively affected by its use at council meetings. Unlike a moment of silence which permits believers and non-believers alike to reflect privately on their own principles and beliefs, the current Town Prayer excludes those individuals who do not believe in invoking the guidance of a singular god in the context of the work of local government.¹⁴¹

Ultimately, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario decided that “opening Town Council meetings with a recitation of the Town Prayer constitutes discrimination under the Code on the basis of creed,” and ordered The Corporation of the Town of Penetanguishene “to refrain from reciting the current Town Prayer at the opening of public council meetings.”¹⁴²

The case of *Freitag v. Town of Penetanguishene* has been cited by those who wish to extend the banning of prayer in town council meetings. Secular Ontario, “a non-profit corporation formed in 2006 to promote and defend the secular and civil nature of Ontario society,”¹⁴³ has recently taken on the issue of prayers at council meetings in Ontario through a campaign of letter writing. They have sent “letters to 28 Ontario municipalities” as well as a letter to the Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs¹⁴⁴ regarding the use of prayer in council meetings, citing the case of *Freitag v. Town of Penetanguishene, (Town) 1999* as demonstrating

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., Paragraph [2].

¹⁴¹ Ibid., Paragraph [46].

¹⁴² Ibid., Paragraphs [53]; [55].

¹⁴³ “Home of Secular Ontario,” <http://www.secularontario.ca/>, *Secular Ontario*, December 28, 2010, accessed February 5, 2014.

¹⁴⁴ “Letters Sent,” <http://www.secularontario.ca/sentletter.html>, *Secular Ontario*, accessed February 5, 2014.

that such prayers are illegal. As of this writing (February 5, 2014) the Secular Ontario website claims it has

“received only one official response” to their letters, and that response came from the Ontario Minister of Municipal Affairs “who declined to take any actions to stop councils from performing their illegal activities.”¹⁴⁵

2.2.4.2.2 Allen v. Corporation of the County of Renfrew

In 2000 The Renfrew County Council (Renfrew, Ontario) adopted a non-denominational prayer for the commencement of its meetings in place of the Lord’s Prayer, which had been previously recited for over a hundred years, in order to be more inclusive. This prayer read as follows:

Almighty God, we give thanks for the great blessings which have been bestowed on Canada and its citizens, including the gifts of freedom, opportunity, and peace that we enjoy. Guide us in our deliberations as [County Councillors], and strengthen us in our awareness of our duties and responsibilities. Grant us wisdom, knowledge, and understanding to preserve the blessings of this country for the benefit of all and to make good laws and wise decisions. Amen.¹⁴⁶

The recitation of this prayer before council meetings was challenged by Robert Allen, a Renfrew resident “who occasionally attended council meetings,” and “did not believe in God.”¹⁴⁷ Renfrew argued that it violated his Charter right to freedom of conscious and religion, and that it caused him mental distress. In the 2004 judgment of this case, *Allen v. Corporation of the County of Renfrew (2004)*, the applicant’s religious beliefs were summarized:

The applicant in this matter is a member of the Humanist Association of Canada and refers to himself as a “Secular Humanist”. He deposes that Humanists do not believe in a God. His beliefs are reflected in a pamphlet appended to his affidavit entitled “Ten Core Beliefs of Humanists”. The most relevant provisions to the issues herein are ss. 3 and 4 which I set out below:

¹⁴⁵ “Responses Received,” <http://www.secularontario.ca/recresponse.html>, *Secular Ontario*, accessed February 5, 2014.

¹⁴⁶ *Allen v. Corporation of the County of Renfrew*, Ontario Superior Court of Justice, February 10, 2004, Paragraph [3].

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, second paragraph from top.

3. Human beings require (to some extent) a system of belief in order to function.

So far, most belief systems have revolved around the idea of an external god or gods: However the same need to believe can be equally served by alternative systems of philosophy. The Humanists' system is founded on using the scientific method to establish the factual basis of any data, and on basing human behaviour on reasonable conduct and democratic principles.

4. Humanists believe that in all its forms the supernatural is a myth.

Believing in an external God is a uniquely human activity. While it has undoubtedly produced some advantages for humankind it has also been a source of considerable divisiveness and strife. Humanists [...] are people who do not believe in the idea of a Divine Architect or Regulator who has constructed the universe and controls human affairs, and they reject religions based on dogma, revelation, or mysticism.¹⁴⁸

The judge questioned whether Humanism was a religion (“It is relevant to consider whether Humanism is a religion, whether or to what extent the new prayer is truly non-sectarian and, if it is not, is the recital of this prayer in the circumstances coercive in nature to those, like the applicant, who do not pray and do not believe in God.”¹⁴⁹) and cited retired Carleton University professor of comparative religion, Dr. Gualtieri, as stating that Humanism is “in fact a religion ‘from an academic perspective’.”¹⁵⁰

It is unclear from the judgment, which dismissed the case, how the question of whether Humanism is or is not a religion shaped – or may have shaped – the decision, which claimed that the prayer, with its “mere mention of God” did not “interfere in any material way with [the applicant’s] religious beliefs.”¹⁵¹ Reading the judgment, it seems irrelevant whether Humanism is a religion or not, since it argued not that ‘other’ or minority religions have a right to prayer-free (or at least non-God invoking) town hall meetings, but that the invoking of a non-denominational god in a town council prayer “cannot be seen as a coercive effort to compel religious observance” and that it was “broadly inclusive [...] even though the reference to God

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., Paragraph [9].

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., Paragraph [11].

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., Paragraph [13].

¹⁵¹ Ibid., Paragraph [27].

was not consistent with the beliefs of some minority groups.”¹⁵² Furthermore, the judgment states:

In a pluralistic society, religious, moral or cultural values put forward in a public governmental context cannot always be expected to meet with universal acceptance. It would be incongruous and contrary to the intent of the Charter to hold that the practice of offering a prayer to God per se is a violation of the religious freedom of non-believers. The preamble to the Charter itself specifically refers to the supremacy of God. The purpose of the prayer was not to impose a Christian or other denominational stamp on the proceedings of the county council. Nor was that its effect. While the principles protected by s. 2(a) of the Charter include the right to be free from direct or indirect coercion to act in a way contrary to one's beliefs and the freedom not to conform to the religious practices of the majority, this does not mean that every minor affront to one's beliefs is a violation of one's freedom of religion as protected by the Charter. The prayer in its present form was not in substance a religious observance, coercive or otherwise, and did not impose any burden on the applicant or any restriction on his exercise of his own beliefs. The recital of the prayer did not compel the applicant to participate in a Christian or other denominational form of worship.¹⁵³

From this judgment it would seem that the question of prayer in town halls has to do with coercion; as long as the prayer is not coercive it is acceptable in a pluralistic society, and “minor affront[s]” to religious beliefs in council settings are acceptable so long as the purpose is “not to impose a Christian or other denominational stamp on the proceedings” and it is not a “religious observance” – the definition of which is notably absent from the judgment.

2.2.4.2.3 Other Recent Cases

Atheists making formal complaints in the hopes of bringing about a cessation to prayer in town council meetings or municipal governmental proceedings have also occurred in other provinces besides Ontario. In Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, for example, after a human rights complaint was filed about a Christian prayer which was recited at a city event (a volunteer breakfast) in 2012, city council's executive committee voted to “script general and inclusive language to use that will incorporate spirituality but not name a particular deity.”¹⁵⁴ Ashu Solo,

¹⁵² Ibid., fourth paragraph from the top.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Sarah Boesveld, “Saskatoon shifts to non-specific religious prayer, but fight not over for atheist who made complaint,” <http://life.nationalpost.com/2013/10/01/saskatoon-shifts-to-non-specific-religious-prayer-but-fight-not-over-for-atheist-who-made-complaint/>, *National Post*, October 1, 2013, accessed February 4, 2014.

an outspoken atheist who filed the complaint, was not satisfied with this response. Following Mayor Don Atchison's announcement of this change in procedure, Solo told the media:

I think Atchison is misrepresenting what inclusive means. To him being inclusive is having Christian messaging, but the only way to be inclusive and to respect all religions is to be secular, because there are over 10,000 religions, [...] It's impossible to cover all religion, so therefore you should cover no religion.¹⁵⁵

Councillor Randy Donauer, who had led the prayer that Solo complained about, argued that prayer was common in Saskatoon so council did not want to ban it, but rather, opted instead to make it more inclusive:

We got to the point pretty quick where we didn't want to ban it in the public arena or at civic events completely because it's a very common thing out here and I think there'd be a lot of people upset by that, [...] What we're trying to do is come up with a policy that, rather than banning it, is inclusive and not offensive and celebrates the diversity of where we're living.¹⁵⁶

While this celebration of diversity through prayer may include those who believe in prayer, it is unclear how this inclusiveness extends to those, such as Solo, who do not. The most recent example comes from Quebec.

2.2.4.2.4 The Last Word on Prayer

In a highly publicized case from Saguenay, Quebec, Saguenay citizen and atheist Alain Simoneau, backed by Mouvement Laïque Québécois, filed a complaint with the Quebec Human Rights Commission arguing that the recitation of prayer before council meetings and the inclusion of religious symbols, such as a crucifix, in council chambers, violated his constitutional rights.¹⁵⁷

In 2011 Quebec's Human Rights Tribunal ruled in Simoneau's favour against Saguenay Mayor Jean Tremblay, ordering a stop to the nondenominational prayers and the removal of

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Graeme Hamilton, "Jean Tremblay allowed to say a prayer before council meetings, Quebec court rules," <http://news.nationalpost.com/2013/05/27/quebec-mayor-allowed-to-say-a-20-second-prayer-before-council-meetings-quebec-court-rules-after-citizen-complaint/>, *National Post*, May 27, 2013, accessed February 5, 2014.

religious symbols from council chambers, as well as a fine, to be paid to Simoneau, of \$30,000. The religious symbols are a crucifix and a Sacred Heart statue which are currently in the council chamber. In 2013 Quebec's Court of Appeal overturned that decision, arguing that the nondenominational prayer did not favour one religion over another, and that Christian symbols, such as the crucifix, the white cross on Quebec's flag, and the reference to God in the National Anthem are cultural and do not necessarily compromise state neutrality on religious matters:

These forms of religious particularism which we find scattered here and there in the public space are only historical manifestations of the religious dimension of Quebec society, which, when viewed with proper perspective, cannot have the effect of undermining the neutrality of the various branches of the State.¹⁵⁸

During the appeal hearing Mayor Tremblay stated, "It is not only the trial of Jean Tremblay. It is more than that: it is about the whole culture of Quebec."¹⁵⁹ This argument – that symbols such as the crucifix are cultural rather than religion, seems to have found agreement with the Court of Appeal, who wrote that the cross and the Sacred Heart statue "are, for a significant portion of the population, deprived of their religious connotation and that their presence is primarily of interest from the viewpoint of a historical cultural heritage and in no way interferes with the neutrality of the City."¹⁶⁰ In essence, by arguing against 'cultural symbols' Simoneau is portrayed as arguing against Quebec culture, and as Lori G. Beaman has recently argued, this makes him a threat to that culture:

¹⁵⁸ *Saguenay (Ville de) c. Mouvement laïque Québécois*, 2013, Court of Appeal, paragraph 104. Original French reads: "Ces formes de particularisme religieux que l'on retrouve dispersées ici et là dans l'espace public ne sont que des manifestations historiques de la dimension religieuse de la société québécoise qui, lorsque replacées dans une juste perspective, ne peuvent avoir pour effet de compromettre la neutralité des différents appareils de l'État."

¹⁵⁹ "Supreme Court to hear case of municipal council opening meetings with prayer," <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/supreme-court-to-hear-case-of-municipal-council-opening-meetings-with-prayer/article16364426/>, *Globe and Mail*, January 16, 2014, accessed February 15, 2014.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, Paragraph 125. Original French reads: "Je suis d'avis que la preuve entendue par le Tribunal appuie largement l'idée selon laquelle ces deux signes religieux (la croix et la statue du Sacré-Cœur) sont pour une partie importante de la population dépourvus de leur connotation religieuse et que leur présence relève essentiellement d'un patrimoine culturel historique n'interférant nullement avec la neutralité de la Ville."

The use of municipal legislative power to pass a bylaw that forces prayer in a public meeting is a striking abuse of power, and yet it is not framed in that manner. Instead it is Mr. Simoneau who is constructed as the threat.¹⁶¹

On April 15, 2015, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled that the City of Saguenay and the mayor must cease opening town council meetings with prayers and pay Simoneau for compensatory damages, punitive damages and court costs. The court did not address the issue of religious symbols in town councils as they limited their decision to prayer, arguing that the state has a duty to remain religiously neutral:

None of the arguments advanced by the respondents can refute the inescapable conclusion that, in the instant case, the By-law and the City's practice with respect to the prayer are incompatible with the state's duty of religious neutrality. The Tribunal's findings of fact on the religious and discriminatory nature of the By-law and of the practice were not unreasonable; quite the contrary. The prayer creates a distinction, exclusion and preference based on religion that has the effect of impairing Mr. Simoneau's right to full and equal exercise of his freedom of conscience and religion.¹⁶²

The court also said that the "freedom not to believe, to manifest one's non-belief and to refuse to participate in religious observance is" protected since "freedom of religion includes the freedom to have no religious beliefs whatsoever. For the purposes of the protections afforded by the charters, the concepts of 'belief' and 'religion' encompass non-belief, atheism and agnosticism."¹⁶³ The court addressed the criticism that banning prayer favours atheism over theism, arguing that there is a difference between unbelief and neutrality:

In short, there is a distinction between unbelief and true neutrality. True neutrality presupposes abstention, but it does not amount to a stand favouring one view over another. No such inference can be drawn from the state's silence.¹⁶⁴

Interestingly, the court also ruled that "the reference to the supremacy of God in the preamble to the Canadian Charter cannot lead to an interpretation of freedom of conscience and

¹⁶¹ Lori G. Beaman, "Freedom of and Freedom from Religion: Atheist Involvement in Legal Cases," in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 39-52; 48.

¹⁶² *Mouvement laïque québécois v. Saguenay*, 2015, Supreme Court of Canada, Paragraph 150.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, Paragraph 70.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Paragraph 134.

religion that authorizes the state to consciously profess a theistic faith” because it “articulates the political theory on which the Charter’s protections are based.”¹⁶⁵ In other words, the mentioning of God in the constitution is interpreted as political rather than religious.

From the last two cases addressed in this section on prayer, that of Saskatoon and Saguenay, we can see different reactions to the recitation of prayer in town councils in the context of increasing diversity and atheism. In the case of Saskatoon, the council opted for a non-denominational prayer, which – presumably – is meant to include everyone, even atheists. This paints atheist complainants as unreasonable – unable to cooperate with an ‘inclusive’ prayer, one meant to be appreciated by a diverse community; one based around common values rather than a specific religion. In the Court of Appeal ruling on the Saguenay case, the nondenominational prayer was judged to be fine, yet in *Freitag v. Penetanguishene (Town), 2013*, the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario ruled that the nondenominational prayer was nonetheless prefaced on belief in a god (in this case Judeo-Christian), and as such was judged unconstitutional. The Saguenay Court of Appeal ruling portrays complainants as reasonable citizens who have had their constitutional rights violated and offers yet another argument that has been taken into consideration: that what was historically a religious symbol may be re-appropriated as a cultural symbol, by extension insinuating that complainants of such symbols are anti-culture rather than anti-religion. This is perhaps the most potentially damaging in terms of an atheist’s – or atheists’ – reputation: if one is considered to be against the culture one is surrounded by, one is by default considered to be either an outsider to that culture or culturally-self-hating; at the very least an enemy. As Beaman explains:

As Christianity is transformed into culture, and its symbols become a part of ‘our’ heritage, atheists are potentially less able to challenge the presence of those symbols in the public sphere. Instead of challenging the presence of god, and religion, they are then challenging ‘our nation’, which renders them much more

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., Paragraph 147.

vulnerable to accusations of radicalness, unreasonableness, and as being somehow ‘against’ rather than ‘for’ us.¹⁶⁶

This ongoing process of re-articulating religion as heritage, at least in Quebec, has the potential to influence how the ‘average’ citizen views atheists; indeed, is relevant to note that due to his formal complaints Mr. Simoneau claims to have received threats (harassing phone calls and the insertion of white crosses into his vehicle) which he has reported to police.¹⁶⁷ Although this is certainly concerning, as of yet the mainstream English Canadian news media have not produced any notable anti-atheist commentaries based primarily on the basis of atheists being anti-cultural, although they have found other points on which to criticize contemporary atheists. Although the Supreme Court ultimately ruled in Simoneau’s favour there will nonetheless be those who view the judgment as an affront to tradition and culture and it remains to be seen how this ruling will affect other town council meetings across Canada, and if it will spark a complaint from within parliament regarding the recitation of prayer in the House of Commons at the beginning of each sitting.

2.2.5 Treatment of Atheism by the Mainstream Media

One way of gauging a nation’s religious character is through a discourse analysis of its treatment of religion in media outlets. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to conduct a thoroughly detailed analysis of how religion is treated in Canada, it is nonetheless worthwhile citing a few examples of how atheism is treated by mainstream news outlets in order to gain a sense of what journalists think about atheism in Canada, and by extension, the contours of acceptability for atheism in Canada. For this reason I have selected a few representative articles from the mainstream Canadian news media, most of which were originally offered in print but

¹⁶⁶ Beaman, 53.

¹⁶⁷ See *Simoneau c. Tremblay*, *Human Rights Tribunal*, 2011, paragraphs 52-53.

were also available online.¹⁶⁸ The sections under this heading are “Negative Portrayals,” which primarily refers to the expansion of an atheist caricature based on the popularity of New Atheism, and “Positive Portrayals,” which mainly refer to atheists speaking on behalf of themselves. I conclude that although atheism is often misrepresented in opinion articles, the mainstream Canadian news media has made inroads in providing atheists with a voice to counter those misrepresentations.

My interest here is on commentaries and opinion pieces on atheism or atheists in popular Canadian news media. In other words, I am looking at news with an ‘agenda’, which, as explained by Alan Durant and Marina Lambrou,

can use its own framing and storytelling techniques to highlight issues, to campaign, to criticise, to celebrate, to promote forthcoming events, or to attack attention to or distract attention from *other* events. This view of news is essentially that news language serves rhetorical purposes as much as it reflects how things are or what has happened. News, in such a perspective, may even offer only a distorted and distorting account of how the world is. To understand the language of news, accordingly, would be to understand its capacity for bias, manipulation and possibly deception as well as its potential to inform.”¹⁶⁹

The time span I examined was fall 2007 until fall 2014. I have been collecting news articles that mention atheism or atheists from Canada’s major news sources. The list of sources from which I collected articles is as follows: *Calgary Herald*; *CBC News*; *Edmonton Journal*; *Globe and Mail*; *Montreal Gazette*; *National Post*; *Ottawa Citizen*; *Saskatchewan Star Phoenix*; *Toronto Star*; *Toronto Sun*; *Vancouver Sun*; and the *Winnipeg Free Press*. For the discussions that follow I have selected articles which show clear and common biases and which generated a large amount of comments under their online publications – articles which facilitated discussion.

I found Allan Bell’s descriptions of ‘consonance’ and ‘facility’ in media useful in terms of analysing these textual discourses. In *The Language of News Media*, Bell describes the ‘consonance’ of a story as “its compatibility with preconceptions about the social group or nation

¹⁶⁸ I collected all articles from the official websites where they were first posted.

¹⁶⁹ Alan Durant and Marina Lambrou, *Language and Media*, New York: Routledge, 2009, 85-86.

from which the news actors come.”¹⁷⁰ This is useful for considering what stereotypes about atheists each article suggests. Bell describes ‘facility’ as “the degree to which a story contains the kinds of facts and figures on which hard news thrives: locations, names, sums of money, numbers of all kinds.”¹⁷¹ This is useful for considering the stereotypes in terms of how ‘facts’ are used, what facts are implied, which facts are lacking, and alternative interpretations of facts. Where appropriate I also utilize Alan Durant’s notion of a ‘meaning troublespot’, which pertains to the negotiation of contested discourse and the process which is usually involved in ‘resolving’ these incidents.

2.2.5.1 Negative Portrayals

My analysis of negative media coverage, specifically opinion pieces, reveals common themes: 1. Atheism is merged with New Atheism; 2. The arguments and opinions of the New Atheists are often misrepresented; 3. Atheists are portrayed as angry and constantly complaining; 4. Atheism is conflated with religion; 5. Atheists innately lack some ‘normative’ capacities; and, 6. Atheists have a problematic relationship with morality. The following section explores the details of these themes.

In the *National Post*’s Religion Blog, the *Holy Post*, atheism has received its fair share of coverage. Indeed, the *Holy Post* itself claims that “contributors come from all across the faith spectrum — even the non-faith point of view will be well represented.”¹⁷² The editor of the *Holy Post*, Charles Lewis, is a frequent contributor to the forum on religious issues, offering his journalistic perspective to interested readers in articles dealing with the religious and the secular. In terms of atheism, in December 2010 he wrote an article titled “Dear atheists: most of us don’t

¹⁷⁰ Allan Bell, *The Language of News Media*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 157.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁷² “Blogs,” <http://www.nationalpost.com/blogs/index.html>, *National Post*, accessed November 30, 2013.

care what you think.” The article argued that debates between Christians and atheists are useless, “for one simple reason: most atheists do not have a clue what religion is about.”¹⁷³ He also stated that “Atheists are utopians who believe a perfect society can be built if only religion was not in the way,” and that these naïve atheists “are under the ridiculous illusion that religious people think that all they have to do is call out to God and help will be on the way.”¹⁷⁴

Charles Lewis followed up that article just over a week later with one titled “Dear atheists: can’t we all just get along or whatever?” It was written in reply to the response he received from his previous article, as he explains: “I have been a journalist for close to three decades but nothing I have ever written before came close to the kind of negative reaction that this piece called forth. Most of the 800 or so responses on the blog were either incredulous or hostile.”¹⁷⁵ In this follow-up article he insinuates that many of the responders were upset by his reference to Christopher Hitchens:

Saying bad things about Hitchens, it turns out, is a very bad thing to do. Apparently he is the only atheist “born without sin.” It was finally made clear to me that I should no more insult Hitchens than someone should insult the Blessed Virgin Mary or Jesus – something no atheist would ever dream of doing.¹⁷⁶

Finally, he explains that he does not hate atheists nor “the chief atheist St. Christopher.”¹⁷⁷ This is not the first time he has written of Hitchens in these religious terms. In 2009 Lewis wrote an article about a talk Hitchens gave as having “the feel of a deeply religious sermon” and referred to Hitchens as “his Anti-Holiness.”¹⁷⁸

¹⁷³ Charles Lewis, “Dear atheists: most of us don’t care what you think,” <http://life.nationalpost.com/2010/12/05/dear-atheists-most-of-us-dont-care-what-you-think/#ixzz17MpntOq>, *National Post, Holy Post*, December 5, 2010, accessed December 5, 2010.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Charles Lewis, “Dear atheists: can’t we all just get along or whatever?” <http://life.nationalpost.com/2010/12/16/dear-atheists-cant-we-all-just-get-along-or-whatever/#ixzz18WZx4N8I>, *National Post, Holy Post*, December 16, 2010, accessed December 16, 2010.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Charles Lewis, “Commandments lecture series: A professional atheist takes on God’s laws,” <http://network.nationalpost.com/NP/blogs/holy-post/archive/2009/06/02/commandments-lecture-series-a>

Lewis' article, the comments the article received, and Lewis' follow-up article are a good example of the process involved in what Alan Durant terms a "meaning troublespot", which addresses contested discourse. Durant outlines such a process as including the following stages (numbers added for ease of referencing in follow-up points below – I omitted a sixth stage that seems irrelevant to this particular case¹⁷⁹):

1. An utterance (or representation) is made public by being published, broadcast or exhibited, involving (a) words (or images, or both), in (b) some specific social setting and (c) against a backdrop of expectations, attitudes and beliefs that shape how the communicator anticipates the message will be understood.
2. Various readers, hearers or members of an audience who encounter the utterance or text attribute a meaning to it; on the basis of that meaning, they derive some particular significance or effect that they associate with what has been said, written or shown.
3. One or more people claim, given their particular way of interpreting the piece of discourse, to have experienced an effect which they believe to be harmful (they may feel they were lied to, misled or misrepresented, or they may feel in some way let down or offended).
4. To seek some relief from or remedy against the perceived harmful effect, the party who feels injured sets in motion some form of public complaint, protest or litigation.
5. The producer of the utterance or text denies that it means what the injured party *says* it means, and puts forward an alternative, competing account.¹⁸⁰

The events surrounding the 'Lewis article' fit the stages of Durant's notion of a meaning troublespot as follows:

1. The communicator represented atheists as utopian, delusional, and ignorant. From his follow-up article it seems he was surprised by the reaction it garnered, so we can assume he did not see his initial article as controversial, which hints at his initial conception of the article's audience (*Holy Post* readers) as being in agreement with him.
2. Various readers attributed meaning to the text – the meaning was interpreted by many readers as claiming that atheists are utopian, delusional, and ignorant. Since these are negative traits, the significance would likely be that atheists are not desirable, or it is not desirable to be an atheist.

professional-atheist-takes-on-god-s-laws.aspx#ixzz1NOeKYsQx, *National Post, Holy Post*, June 02, 2009, accessed June 02, 2009.

¹⁷⁹ Alan Durant, *Meaning in the Media: Discourse, Controversy and Debate*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 28. The sixth stage is: "A relevant adjudicating body (or the wider 'court of public opinion') scrutinizes the discourse in question. Because discussion of the discourse is not, in its reproduced media form, dialogic or immediately interactive, commentary and analysis interrupt the flow of social action and present the question of 'meaning' as a kind of 'freeze frame' or reconstruction, an exercise temporarily offline from the continuing interests and agendas of the participants."

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 27-28. Emphasis in original.

3. Judging by the comments a significant percentage of atheists felt insulted, misrepresented, and/or offended.
4. According to Lewis “800 or so” people responded negatively to his article; their comments under the article can be viewed as a form of public protest.
5. Lewis in turn responded to these critical comments by insinuating that those who were offended were unnecessarily hostile (one can assume this means insensitive to his side), pointing out that he does not hate atheists, and placing the blame on those who were critical of his treatment of Christopher Hitchens in the initial article (in other words, the problem is that atheists are zealous in their admiration for Hitchens).

There are two additional points with regard to Lewis’ response article that speak to his treatment of atheists. One is that atheism is conflated with New Atheism; by calling Hitchens “the chief atheist” he strongly merges atheism with the ‘so-called’ New Atheist movement. The second point is that Lewis conflates atheism with religion. Instead of accepting an atheist’s claim of being non-religious, Lewis hints that he views atheism as a shift into a new religion, the religion of atheism. Lewis, however, is not the only reputable Canadian journalist to conflate atheists with being religious in their passion for disbelief; Rex Murphy has also written about atheists, arguing that they are unwittingly seeking religion.

In 2013 popular political/cultural pundit and media personality Rex Murphy wrote a commentary for the *National Post* called “Angry Atheists,” which he began by referencing Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins:

Such “professional” atheists also display an unseemly infatuation with being regarded as victims. When they are not being superior and angry, their more frequent pose, they are whining that their non-beliefs do not receive the respect or standing of their opposites.¹⁸¹

Murphy, as with Lewis, conflates atheism with the New Atheists. The article then turned to a diatribe on atheists in the United States who argue that atheists in the military deserve a chaplain that can serve their needs:

¹⁸¹ Rex Murphy, “The Angry Atheist”, <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2013/07/27/rex-murphy-the-angry-atheist/>, *National Post*, June 27, 2013, accessed December 1, 2013.

When atheists wail for a chaplain, when they lament their status vis a vis Buddhists, Muslims, Jews and Christians, we have a group athirst for what they otherwise proclaim they despise. They unwittingly manifest an admiration and hunger for religion and its many solaces, and proffer anger as a cover for envy. On the actual question itself, that of chaplains for non-believers, there is little need to pronounce. It is ludicrous. Only those seeing through a glass, darkly, could make such a claim in the first place.¹⁸²

Murphy argues that the main reason atheists are calling for their own military chaplain is that they “unwittingly” admire and “hunger for religion.” He portrays them as angry and in denial; what they presumably want, according to Murphy, is religion – atheists are thus portrayed as misguided spiritual seekers.

Also in 2013, *CBC Radio* broadcaster Michael Enright wrote an essay, published online, titled “Could Atheists Please Stop Complaining” in which he begins: “If the atheists of the world could ever organize themselves into a non-religious church, their first Pope would undoubtedly be Richard Dawkins,”¹⁸³ and goes on to argue that:

Atheists are not being prosecuted or silenced. They are lovingly tended by media interviewers, me included, and their nuanced arguments are politely acknowledged. The problem to me is that they won't shut up about it. The public, endless public profession of atheism to me reflects a whiny, whining self-pitying narcissism. In the last ten years or so, atheism has taken on some of the elements of fundamentalist Christianity.¹⁸⁴

As with Lewis and Murphy, Enright conflates atheism with religion, in this case suggesting that atheism is beginning to resemble his image of “fundamentalist Christianity.” There are also editorialists in the mainstream news media who argue atheists are spiritual, rather than religious.

In his article entitled “At Thanksgiving, do atheists feel grateful? People who regularly express gratitude are generally healthier,” award winning *Vancouver Sun* spirituality and

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Michael Enright, “Michael's Essay: Could Atheists please stop complaining?” <http://www.cbc.ca/thesundayedition/essays/2013/09/29/atheists-stop-whining/>, *CBC Radio*, September 29, 2013, accessed December 1, 2013.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

diversity writer Douglas Todd asks “Are atheists thankful? And if so, to whom? Or what?”¹⁸⁵ He compounds these initial questions by arguing that “many of the so-called new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins promote the concept of the “selfish gene”, which Todd suggests “maintains that all biological and human behaviour can be reduced to self-interest,” and that in such a universe “there is no room for pure empathy or authentic human altruism.”¹⁸⁶

To answer his initial question about atheists having an ability to feel grateful, Todd explains how some philosophers believe atheists can indeed feel grateful, and he points to the sun as an example of something atheists can feel grateful for. He concludes by pointing out that atheist author Pat Duffy Hutcheon’s hymn about evolution and life, called *Amazing Life*, is not so different as an expression of awe than that of the religious, and that by “expressing amazement for the greatness of life itself” the author “became like many ‘spiritual’ people”.¹⁸⁷

There are two points worth highlighting about this article. The first is that Todd assumes that there is a good possibility that atheists cannot feel grateful, yet in order for atheists to be normal, that is, to be mentally healthy people, they need to be grateful, and if they are grateful for life itself, the sun, existence, etc., than they are suddenly “like many ‘spiritual’ people”. The second point is that Todd represents himself as familiar with the writings of the New Atheists, yet misrepresents their opinion on altruism and the selfish gene, and he does not acknowledge that in Christopher Hitchens’ edited volume *The Portable Atheist*, philosopher and one of the four most referenced New Atheists, Daniel Dennett, contributed an essay entitled “Thank Goodness!” in which he uses his near-death experience to answer the very question about

¹⁸⁵ Douglas Todd, “At Thanksgiving, do atheists feel grateful? People who regularly express gratitude are generally healthier,”

<http://www.vancouversun.com/life/Thanksgiving+atheists+feel+grateful/3649675/story.html#ixzz17kMWfT3P>, *Vancouver Sun*, October 9, 2010, accessed October 9, 2010.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

gratitude that Todd asks.¹⁸⁸ This is yet another example of an article which demonstrates that reputable journalists who write on religion often use the New Atheists as representative of all atheists, yet they do not show much knowledge of their actual arguments and instead caricaturize them.

Another issue is that atheists have a problematic relationship with morality. *Calgary Herald* columnist Mark Milke wrote an article published in April 2010 entitled “Atheists’ musings on morality lightweight”. His only example of an atheist musing on the subject is Richard Dawkins. Milke argues that: “The use of moral language presumes a standard, another reality apart from the physical world. And it’s not sufficient to offer the reply that morality evolved, or that human beings are hardwired for co-operation, or that morality is a reflection of our need for self-preservation.”¹⁸⁹ Milke concludes that “The language of morality used by an atheist is as artificial as the very realm [Platonic or Divine] which Dawkins claims is only in our imagination.”¹⁹⁰

In this article Milke treats the subject of morality with the presupposition that the language of morality has roots in another realm and that the claim that “morality evolved” is “not sufficient”; as such it is easy to see how atheists can be seen as devoid of moral authority. This

¹⁸⁸ Two years before Todd’s article in the *Vancouver Sun*, one of the four most prominent new atheists answered his question in another New Atheists’ edited volume: “[W]hen I say “Thank goodness!” this is not merely a euphemism for “Thank God!” I really do mean thank goodness! There is a lot of goodness in this world, and more goodness every day, and this fantastic human-made fabric of excellence is genuinely responsible for the fact that I am alive today. It is a worthy recipient of the gratitude I feel today, and I want to celebrate that fact here and now. To whom, then, do I owe a debt of gratitude? To the cardiologist who has kept me alive and ticking for years, and who swiftly and confidently rejected the original diagnoses of nothing worse than pneumonia. To the surgeons, neurologists, anesthesiologists, and the perfusionist, who kept my systems going for many hours under daunting circumstances.” From Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*, (United States: Da Capo Press, 2007), 278.

¹⁸⁹ Mark Milke, “Atheists’ musings on morality lightweight,” <http://www.calgaryherald.com/life/Atheists+musings+morality+lightweight/2761698/story.html#ixzz0kGewtDp5>, *Calgary Herald*, April 4, 2010, accessed April 4, 2010.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

need not be the case however, as Sam Harris argues in his book *The Moral Landscape*,¹⁹¹ yet Milke presents atheists such as Harris as not having any authority to speak on the subject of morality. In essence Milke's article argues that atheists have no credibility when it comes to offering an opinion on morality.

Faith is yet another area that Canadian columnists have written about with regard to atheism. In her article "Faith is innate – not a decision", Lucy Leiderman argues that atheists are born with "no innate capacity to feel" faith.¹⁹² In posing her theory she explains that faith "may be compared to love and empathy," and asks why it is "that someone who is incapable of love is a psychopath and someone who is incapable of empathy is a sociopath, but someone who is incapable of faith is an atheist?"¹⁹³ In her article "Atheists' only faith is in not having faith", Kelly McPharland proposes the opposite opinion of Leiderman's thesis, writing: "Atheists are defined by their disbelief. i.e. the biggest thing in their life is that they don't believe in something."¹⁹⁴ Columnist John Moore, who happens to be an atheist, wrote an article in response to McPharland's, in which he explains that her argument "is a deliberate mischaracterization of non believers designed to make them look hysterical. To be truthful single malt scotch and bicycles play a bigger role in my life than having left the church."¹⁹⁵

These examples have illustrated the main negative themes regarding common characteristics of atheism and atheists in mainstream Canadian news media. Atheism is constantly conflated with New Atheism, and all atheists, by extension, are portrayed as New

¹⁹¹ See: Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*, (Toronto: Free press, 2010).

¹⁹² Lucy Leiderman, "Faith is innate — not a decision," <http://life.nationalpost.com/2011/03/10/faith-is-innate-%E2%80%94-not-a-decision/>, *National Post*, *Holy Post*, March 10, 2011, accessed November 30, 2013.

¹⁹³ Ibid.

¹⁹⁴ Kelly McParland, 3/12/10, "Atheists' only faith is in not having faith," <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2010/12/03/kelly-mcparland-atheists-only-faith-is-in-not-having-faith/>, *National Post*, December 3, 2010, accessed November 28, 2013.

¹⁹⁵ John Moore, "The sins of the faithful," <http://fullcomment.nationalpost.com/2010/12/04/john-moore-the-sins-of-the-faithful/>, *National Post*, December 4, 2010, accessed December 4, 2010.

Atheists. The arguments and opinions of the New Atheists are often misrepresented or exaggerated, and atheists are portrayed as angry and constantly complaining. Atheism is conflated with religion and atheists are portrayed as either misguided spiritual seekers or those who have their own form of religion and/or spirituality. Atheists are represented as innately lacking some ‘normative’ capacities, such as the ability to have faith, and (at least potentially) the ability to express gratitude. They are also commonly portrayed as having a problematic relationship with morality, and as such they have no authority to speak about morality.

Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira have written about media portrayals of atheism in the British news media, and a few comparisons can be made. In Britain the population of those who identify with ‘no religion’ is the same as Canada at a quarter of the population,¹⁹⁶ yet Knott, Pool and Taira found that in the British media “it is rare to find an overly positive media representation of atheism and its supporters.”¹⁹⁷ They observe that atheists “were commonly portrayed” in the British media “as people of questionable morality who assume all believers are deluded and that religion and science are mutually exclusive.”¹⁹⁸ This notion of atheists having ‘questionable morality,’ is similar to patterns in the Canadian news media which often portray atheists as having a problematic relationship with morality. Their point about the British media portraying atheists as assuming “all believers are deluded and that religion and science are mutually exclusive” was not evident in the Canadian articles on atheism – it certainly was not a main focus of discussion or criticism. Another insight they made, that

¹⁹⁶ Kim Knott, Elizabeth Poole, and Teemu Taira, *Media Portrayals of Religion and the Secular Sacred: Representation and Change*, (Burlington, Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013), 102: In the population Census, people of ‘no religion’[in Britain] constituted the largest group after Christians (25 per cent in 2011), and their number far exceeded the adherents of any of the minority religions.”

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 117.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 101.

due to Dawkins' popularity and outspokenness the media often conflated atheism with the New Atheists also held true to the Canadian context:

The representation of atheism was narrowed down to the views of Dawkins and a few like-minded companions. It is important to bear in mind that there were other kinds of atheists too, as well as humanists, agnostics and other non-religious people, whose voices were not heard in the media, partly because they were not interested in public campaigning but also because the voice of Dawkins was so loud.¹⁹⁹

Commentaries by well-established and prominent journalists on atheism in Canada are often critical of Dawkins and Hitchens and extend that criticism to atheism itself, treating atheists as if they are a monotone group. Yet the Canadian media also provides Canadian atheists with a platform to argue their views, thus providing the media landscape with some positive portrayals of atheism, which is something that Knott et al. do not explore in their chapter, with the exception of noting that Dawkins "celebrity status ensured that whatever he said continued to be widely reported."²⁰⁰ Having pointed out a few of the ways atheists are negatively portrayed in the mainstream Canadian news media, it would be misleading not to also point out some of the positive portrayals which are also a part of the national discourse.

2.2.5.2 Positive Portrayals

The positive portrayals of atheists and atheism in the mainstream Canadian news media often come from media outlets allotting atheists themselves a platform for self-representation. Perhaps the most immediate, in terms of being able to counter the treatment of atheism in editorials and commentaries, is the comment section offered underneath most online versions of news articles. For example, at the time of this writing Rex Murphy's 2013 commentary on

¹⁹⁹ Ibid., 107

²⁰⁰ Ibid., 107.

atheism has received 2377 comments, and many of them disagree with Murphy. One such contributor is S.C., who commented that:

Most people I am close to are, for all intents and purposes, atheists. Atheist is the best description for what we are within a religious taxonomy.

What this really means is that, on a day to day basis, religion plays no role in our lives.

I haven't read Hitchens or Dawkins, because I don't feel it's necessary to prove or disprove "god" to others. I don't really care what other people believe or don't believe unless they're trying to force me to go along with it.

I've said it before and I'll say it again - if atheism is a religion, then not playing hockey is a sport.²⁰¹

This post received 98 votes of approval/agreement and one vote of disapproval/disagreement. Clearly not all readers of Murphy's original posting agree with his opinions, and in the comment section atheists and non-atheists alike have the ability to express their own opinions on the matter. In terms of receiving more prominent platforms for the expression of atheist opinions, some media outlets have also published editorials and commentaries by atheists. Justin Trottier is one such atheist.

Trottier is the former President of the Freethought Association of Canada, former Executive Director and National Communications Director for Centre for Inquiry Canada, and current President of the Canadian Secular Alliance; he has made a name for himself as a prominent Canadian atheist personality; founder of atheist, skeptic, secular, and/or non-belief organizations; and community activist. During the 2009 Canadian manifestation of the Atheist Bus Campaign Trottier acted as spokesperson, which raised his media profile as an outspoken atheist, and he has since contributed articles to the *Globe and Mail* as well as the *National Post's Holy Post* blog.²⁰² Besides writing for national newspapers, Trottier has been a featured guest or

²⁰¹ Murphy. See comments.

²⁰² For the latter, Trottier has contributed commentaries on the United Nations Human Rights Commission defamation of religion resolution (Justin Trottier, "Hijacking the UN Racism Conference," *Holy Post, National Post*, April 21, 2009); the teaching of religion in schools (Justin Trottier, "Why we must teach religion in schools," *Holy Post, National Post*, May 13, 2009); a response to Canadian sociologist Reginald Bibby's book, *The Emerging*

panelist on *SunTV's The Arena*, *TV Ontario's The Agenda with Steve Aiken*, *Crossroads Television System's The Michael Coren Show*, and he has been interviewed by the *CBC*, *CTV Television Network*, and *Global TV*. While there have been articles written which treat atheists in a condescending manner, the inclusion of voices such as Trottier into debates on atheism and religion in addition to issues pertaining to church-state relations does show that atheists have an opportunity to have their voices heard in national discourses. Another atheist who regularly contributes articles pertaining to atheism or non-belief in a prominent newspaper is Kevin Smith.

The *Ottawa Citizen* has a series called “Ask the Religion Experts,” which consists of responses to reader submitted questions by rotating Ottawa-local representatives from different religions. It also includes Kevin Smith, who, as each article explains, “is on the board of directors for the Centre for Inquiry, Canada’s premier venue for humanists, skeptics and freethinkers.” It is not clearly stated whether or not contributors or the editors (or both) decide which question will be answered by which representatives, but Smith’s responses have been published 50% of the time, as is shown on the following chart.²⁰³ In comparison, this means that atheism or nonbelief has not received as much representation in this series as has Anglicanism, Islam; Baha’ism, Catholicism, Buddhism, Judaism, and Protestantism, but has received more representative coverage than Sikhism and Hinduism.

Millennials (Justin Trottier, “Atheist teens lead the way,” *Holy Post, National Post*, June 03, 2009); a Turkish television game show with the goal of converting atheists (Justin Trottier, “Fixing non-believers, live on TV,” *Holy Post, National Post*, July 11, 2009); The Atheist Bus Advertising Campaign (Justin Trottier and Michael Payton, “Defending atheist bus ads,” *National Post, Holy Post*, August 13, 2009, as well as Justin Trottier, “Wheels on the atheist bus still goin' round,” *Holy Post, National Post*, February 27, 2010); an anti-Scientology protest in Halifax (Justin Trottier: Violence at anti-Scientology protest, *Holy Post, National Post*, October 03, 2009); the protection of non-religious worldviews (Justin Trottier: Defining religion vs. philosophy? Have fun with that,” *Holy Post, National Post*, November 27, 2009); and the taxpayer funding of Catholic schools in Ontario (Justin Trottier, Ontario NDP leader dodges Catholic school debate, *Holy Post, National Post*, April 27, 2010). Links for these articles can be found at: “Browse by Tags: All Tags: Justin Trottier (RSS),” <http://network.nationalpost.com/np/blogs/holy-post/archive/tags/Justin+Trottier/default.aspx>, *Holy Post, National Post*, accessed December 8, 2013.

²⁰³ According to the Centre for Inquiry Canada website, Smith began contributing to “Ask the Religion Experts” in April 2010. *History*. The chart was compiled by using the latest, as of this writing, twenty episodes of the series.

Table 1: Ottawa Citizen's "Ask the Religion Experts" July 10, 2013 – November 23, 2013: Questions and Respondents

Question	S	H	CFI	A	I	B	C	Bu	J	P
Can we learn more from the lives of the righteous or the sinners? (November 23, 2013)		x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x
What is the greatest human quality? (November 22, 2013)					x	x		x	x	x
What are we to think when our prayers aren't answered? (November 14, 2013)	x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Is it ethical for insurance companies to deny coverage based on genetic information? (November 8, 2013)			x			x	x		x	x
What does "spiritual, not religious" mean? (October 31, 2013)		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Is there harm in highly sexual music videos and performances? (October 24, 2013)	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x
In the light of public reporting on noted people, has the notion of "innocent until proven guilty" become irrelevant? (October 17, 2013)					x	x	x	x	x	x
Can we ever truly know ourselves? (October 4, 2013)		x				x	x	x	x	x
Does social media bring us closer together or move us further apart? (October 7, 2013)	x						x	x	x	x
Does Quebec's Charter of Values really pose a threat to religious freedom? (October 7, 2013)		x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Is there a place for religion in public schools? (October 7, 2013)	x		x	x	x	x		x	x	x
Should sects be treated differently from religions? (October 7, 2013)						x	x	x	x	x
What are the elements that make up a genuine apology? (August 29, 2013)	x	x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Is your religion really just an 'accident of birth'? (August 22, 2013)		x	x	x	x	x	x		x	x
How can Canada right the wrongs done to First Nation peoples? (August 16, 2013)	x			x	x		x		x	x
Does winning an election give a political party the right to impose its religious strictures? (August 7, 2013)			x	x	x		x	x	x	x
What advice do you have for those with religious doubt? (August 1, 2013)	x		x	x	x		x	x	x	x
What book, holy books aside, has most profoundly influenced your life? (July 25, 2013)		x					x	x	x	x
Why should we take the advice of so-called religious experts? (July 18, 2013)		x		x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Why is [it] that in so many faiths, music plays an important role? (July 10, 2013)	x		x	x		x	x	x	x	x
	8	9	10	12	13	15	17	17	20	20

S=Sikhism; H=Hinduism; CFI = Centre for Inquiry; A= Anglicanism; I=Islam; B=Baha'ism; C=Catholicism; Bu=Buddhism; J=Judaism; P=Protestantism (this includes Bethel Pentecostal Church with 7 entries from July 10, 2013 – August 29, 2013, and Vanier Community Church with 12 entries from October 7, 2013 – November 23, 2013; my assumption is that one Protestant denomination has been switched with another). The links to this series can be found at "Ask the Religion Experts," <http://www.ottawacitizen.com/life/ask-the-religion-experts/index.html>, *Ottawa Citizen*, accessed December 7, 2013.

Atheism has received its fair share of criticism in the contemporary mainstream Canadian news media, as evident from articles written by Lewis and Murphy, yet it has also become part of the religious discourse, and atheists such as Trottier and Smith have regular platforms where they can share their opinions on religion-related matters. While neither media personality can claim (nor, arguably, would even want to claim) to speak on behalf of all atheists in Canada, it is certainly a sign of inclusion that their words are published, even if, in the case of the *Ottawa Citizen*'s "Ask The Religion Experts" series, their words are published less frequently than those from seven faith-groups; six of which hold less of a percentage of the population than those with no religious affiliation (the exception being Catholicism). It is also interesting that, in the case of Trottier and Smith, the forums they are writing for have titles which assume religiosity (the *Holy Post* and "Ask the Religion Experts") rather than assume secularity (i.e. the *Secular Post* and "Ask the Worldview Experts"). This speaks to normativity, arguably vestigial, with the place and forming of religious discourse in mainstream newspapers, and it is under these normative headings which atheists have been, at least in these cases, invited to participate as equal contributors.²⁰⁴

2.2.6 The Atheist Bus Campaign

The Atheist Bus Campaign was a global phenomenon that started in the United Kingdom in 2008 and expanded to fourteen other countries.²⁰⁵ It raised the public profile of atheism

²⁰⁴ Trottier and Payton, in their editorial "Defending atheist bus ads" for the National Post's *Holy Post*, argue that this participation comes from a push for recognition on the atheist side: "Thanks to such assertive advertising and other controversial and edgy manoeuvres, atheists have now emerged alongside the religious in the media — they are regular involved in radio and TV debates, public discussion on campuses and are even invited to contribute to newspaper projects like Holy Post. Who would object to this trend in a country like Canada?" Justin Trottier, Michael Payton, "Defending Atheist Bus Ads," <http://life.nationalpost.com/2009/08/13/justin-trottier-and-michael-payton-defending-atheist-bus-ads/>, *Holy Post, National Post*, August 13, 2009, accessed August 13, 2009.

²⁰⁵ See section 2.2.6.3. Some countries used the same slogan as Britain, others used variations thereof, and some, inspired by the British campaign, created new locally-relevant slogans.

through the use of a slogan which read, “There’s Probably no God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.” The 2009 Canadian campaign using the same slogan was launched by Chris Hammond (creator of a Facebook group and a website, www.atheistbus.ca), in collaboration with the Freethought Association of Canada.²⁰⁶ The official website of the Canadian campaign, atheistbus.ca, describes the slogan as, “a fun, cheerful, and lighthearted way to engage with non-religious and religious viewers,”²⁰⁷ and of the campaign intention the website states:

The Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign seeks to bring awareness to the general public about atheism, humanism, and the secularism. Through our ads we hope to spark conversations between believers and non-believers so that we may better understand each other and learn from one another.²⁰⁸

Besides the Freethought Association of Canada, who worked closely with atheistbus.ca, several other organizations were involved in the campaign, such as The Humanist Association of Ottawa, The Dalhousie University Atheist Community, and the Centre for Inquiry. Humanist Canada created a separate campaign with the slogan, “You Can be Good Without God,” which, as with the Atheist Bus Campaign ‘proper’ ran into difficulty gaining approval in some Canadian cities. The ads ran successfully in Toronto, Calgary, and Montreal, but in Halifax, Ottawa, and Vancouver they were initially rejected. This section will highlight some of the legal matters and widely reported social responses to the Atheist Bus Campaigns that took place in Canada during early 2009.

2.2.6.1 Legal Matters

The Atheist Bus Ads first ran in Toronto before extending to Calgary and Montreal; in each of these cities the ads ran without any incidents of note and insofar as they were accepted

²⁰⁶ “FAQ,” 2009, <http://atheistbus.ca/faq/>, Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign – Official Website, accessed June 18, 2013.

²⁰⁷ “About,” 2009, <http://atheistbus.ca/about/>, Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign – Official Website, accessed June 18, 2013.

²⁰⁸ “About.”

can be seen as successful. In Halifax, Ottawa, and Vancouver, however, acceptance did not come as easily, if at all. On February 2, 2009, Pattison Maritimes refused to run the Freethought Association of Canada's "There's Probably No God, Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life" ads on Halifax buses. The next day Lori Patterson, spokeswoman for Halifax Transit Public Affairs, explained why the ads were rejected:

[...] this groups ads were known to be or were already viewed to be inflammatory or controversial before they reached this market. [...]t could be viewed as inflammatory to a certain group in population and that is certainly what we're hearing. We have to recognize that this is an older area of the country and people still have, you know, traditional views. [...] All the calls we've been getting have been against us running them. [...] Anything considered to be objectionable to any race, creed, or moral standard, you know, we have the right to... or we can refuse. And I've not heard of... You know, we haven't been approached by religious groups to my knowledge before.²⁰⁹

Humanist Canada also had their ad, which featured the slogan, "You can be Good without God," rejected by Pattison Maritimes. According to Pat O'Brien, the president of Humanist Canada, they were told that "the transit authority would reconsider its position if Humanist Canada toned down its message," which O'Brien said "won't happen."²¹⁰

Following these decisions, atheist or humanist bus ads have not appeared on Halifax transit. In Ottawa the situation was different. While the bus ads were initially rejected, Ottawa's City Council eventually allowed the ads to run.

In February 2009, the Freethought Association of Canada, alongside The Humanist Association of Ottawa, attempted to bring to Ottawa the ads with the slogan, "There's Probably no God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life," but they were initially rejected by Ottawa's OC Transpo, who explained: "The Advertising Standards section of our contract specifically excludes religious advertising which might be offensive to transit users, so we cannot approve

²⁰⁹ "Halifax says no to Atheist Bus Campaign slogan," <http://atheistbus.ca/2009/02/03/halifax-says-no-to-atheist-bus-campaign-slogan/>, *Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign – Official Website*, February 3, 2009, accessed July 20, 2013. From an interview with *CBC Radio One – Halifax*.

²¹⁰ "Halifax is keeping God off its buses," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/nova-scotia/story/2009/02/02/ns-transit-god.html>, *CBC News*, February 2, 2009, accessed February 2, 2009.

this ad.”²¹¹ On February 18, 2013, Ottawa City Council’s transit committee held a vote on whether or not the ads should be approved. The vote resulted in a tie, and the matter was sent to Ottawa City Council who voted in favour of a motion directing OC Transpo to accept the ads.

In February 2009 Vancouver’s TransLink had as part of their standards and limitations policy that “[n]o advertisement will be accepted which promotes or opposes a specific theology or religious ethic, point of view, policy or action,”²¹² a policy which was shared by B.C. Transit. Atheist and humanist ads were initially rejected due to this policy: Humanist Canada’s ads with the slogan “You Can Be Good Without God” were rejected by TransLink on the grounds that they infringe on their policy “prohibiting ads promoting or opposing any religious or theological views.”²¹³

Later that summer, on July 10, 2009, the Supreme Court of Canada ruled on *Greater Vancouver Transportation Authority v. Canadian Federation of Students – British Columbia Component*, a case which dealt with the constitutionality of banning political ads. The court found such a ban unconstitutional, and this ruling was immediately interpreted as extending to religious ads as well. Almost two years later, in April 2011, Kamloops Centre for Rational Thought had their ads, featuring the slogan, “There probably is no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life” approved to run on buses in Kelowna and Kamloops, in addition to a bus ad in

²¹¹ “Ottawa Next Stop on Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign,” <http://atheistbus.ca/2009/02/10/ottawa-next-stop-on-canadian-atheist-bus-campaign/>, Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign – Official Website, February 10, 2009, accessed July 25, 2013.

²¹² Larry Pynn, “TransLink faces a devil of a question,” <http://www2.canada.com/vancouversun/news/westcoastnews/story.html?id=e944ef6c-b361-4f46-bd00-a8596300218f>, *Vancouver Sun*, February 04, 2009, accessed February 04, 2009.

²¹³ Does atheist message have a place on transit? TransLink has nixed plans by Humanist Canada for a ‘You Can Be Good Without God’ advertising campaign” <http://www2.canada.com/burnabynow/news/community/story.html?id=e5ddb133-c9a4-42ba-b51c-89c8a2a455cc>, *Burnaby Now*, February 14, 2009, accessed February 14, 2009.

Victoria which had the slogan “Don’t believe in God? You’re not alone.”²¹⁴ At the time Joanna Linsangan, spokeswoman for B.C. Transit, explained: “There really is no legal basis to not allow the ads [...] We can’t refuse to run them just because they may offend someone.”²¹⁵

2.2.6.2 Social Responses

The question of the Atheist Bus Campaign’s acceptability or inadmissibility for public spaces largely revolved around the question of free speech when the speech in question may be offensive to some. Outside of advertising circles and city council debates, the ads found support from at least one religious community: the United Church of Canada.

The United Church of Canada responded to the atheist slogan “There’s Probably No God, Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life,” with a newspaper ad campaign featuring the counter-slogan: “There’s probably a God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” Reverend Keith Howard, executive director of the United Church’s Emerging Spirit Campaign, explained that the United Church’s ads were a response to what they saw as a welcome call for discussion:

I didn't find [the atheist ads] particularly offensive [...] Really what they were trying to do was prompt some discussion. They are by the Freethought Association of Canada. I assume by that title it's not just a cover and they are trying to promote conversation.²¹⁶

Katie Kish, the vice-president of the Freethought Association of Canada, responded to their campaign by explaining that she welcomed the opportunities for further discussions with the United Church:

I think this opens up a lot of good opportunities to work with the United Church of Canada—if they’ll work with us—in holding discussion panels and creating a really big campaign that will

²¹⁴ Susan Lazaruk, “Atheist bus ads ‘pushback’ against ‘fundamentalist crazies’” <http://www.theprovince.com/life/Atheist+pushback+against+fundamentalist+crazies/4550239/story.html#ixzz1IVunKErD>, *The Province*, April 2, 2011, accessed July 28, 2013. The article writes the slogan as “Don’t believe in God, you’re not alone;” I added punctuation.

²¹⁵ Ibid.

²¹⁶ Emily Mathieu, “Church ad builds on idea” <http://www.thestar.com/News/GTA/article/579530>, *The Toronto Star*, January 30, 2009, accessed January 30, 2009.

have atheists understanding those with beliefs and those with beliefs understanding those without beliefs.²¹⁷

In contrast with the United Church, who saw the Atheist Bus Ad Campaign as a welcome opportunity to engage in dialogue, the Calgary-based multifaith group God Exists, which also responded with a counter-campaign, were less positive about the opportunities for discourse the bus ads provided. They did, however, welcome the opportunity to debate atheists in other settings.

God Exists was created by Imam Syed Soharwardy, president of the Islamic Supreme Council of Canada, to counter the atheist bus ads with their own bus campaign featuring the slogan, “God cares for everyone ... even for those who say He doesn’t exist!”²¹⁸ According to Soharwardy, donations to cover the cost of the campaign came from “Calgarians of various faiths, especially Christians.”²¹⁹ Unlike Reverend Howard and the United Church’s counter-campaign, Soharwardy did not see the atheist bus ad campaign as a positive opportunity to engage in public discourse, but rather, he felt that he was “forced to do a counter-campaign,” in order to counter the atheist insinuation that belief in God causes worry:

The message they are saying is that believing in God creates worries, that it takes away joy from people's life, which is wrong. It is not true, [...] Believing in God brings strength, especially in this economic crisis when millions of people face losing their jobs.²²⁰

Shoharwardy’s response, as well as that of God Exists, for which he acted as spokesperson, was to call for Canadians in other cities where the atheist ads were also running “to come forward and launch their campaigns, to have Canadians of different communities unite,” offering them support while doing so: “If they need our support, we will definitely be

²¹⁷ Alex Nino Gheciu, “United Church and Atheists Make Great Frenemies,” http://torontoist.com/2009/02/united_church_and_atheists_make_gre.php, *The Torontoist*, February 5, 2009, accessed February 5, 2009.

²¹⁸ Patti Edgar, “‘God Exists’ group buys own bus ads in Calgary,” <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/calgary/story/2009/03/20/cgy-god-exists-bus-ads-atheist.html>, *CBC News*, March 20, 2009, accessed March 20, 2009.

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

there to help them.”²²¹ Although Soharwardy felt “forced” rather than appreciative of the opportunity to engage in discourse through bus ads, Cliff Erasmus, acting as spokesman for the Calgary branch of the atheist bus campaign, subsequently told the media that a debate with Soharwardy was in the planning stages, and Soharwardy welcomed the forthcoming debate, “I have been trying for many years to organize a dialogue.”²²²

There were certainly some outraged individuals speaking on behalf of religion, (Charles McVety, President of Canada Christian College, publicly called the ads “bigotry,” and not fit for public space),²²³ but overall it seems the negative reaction to the campaign – the fear of offending Canadians which was behind the ads rejection by authorities in Halifax, Ottawa, and Vancouver – was hyperbole compared to the actual opinions by Canadians on the ads, which was largely that of indifference.

A Canadian Harris-Decima telephone poll conducted March 19-22, 2009, found that most Canadians were generally indifferent to the Atheist Bus Ads, with the ads themselves receiving 20% support from respondents, 32% opposition, and 43% indifference – those who responded that they “didn’t care one way or the other.”²²⁴ It must be noted, however, that there was a split

²²¹ Bill Kaufmann, “Atheists and believers faith off on buses,” <http://calsun.canoe.ca/News/Alberta/2009/03/24/8861831-sun.html>, *Calgary Sun*, March 24, 2009, accessed March 24, 2009.

²²² Kaufmann.

²²³ Mathieu. McVety explained his position as such: “I am all for freedom of speech, but in this case this organization is attempting to use public space to attack people of faith and say that they worry and don't enjoy a happy life, [...] If they want to do it on their own, no problem. But if they want to attack other people and show intolerance for (their) belief systems, then that is ... bigotry and public space is no place for bigotry. By bigotry McVety seems to be referring to the ads insinuation that people who believe in God worry and do not enjoy their lives: “When they go on and accuse people of faith of being worriers that don't enjoy life I am offended and people of faith are offended.”

²²⁴ “Most Canadians indifferent to atheist bus ads: poll,” <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/servlet/story/RTGAM.20090325.waethist0325/BNStory/National/home>, *Globe and Mail*, March 25, 2009, accessed March 25, 2009. “The results are considered accurate to within 3.1 percentage points 19 times in 20.” Other interesting results from the poll include the following, “Support for the ads was strongest among respondents in British Columbia and Ontario, with the highest opposition in Manitoba and Saskatchewan. Support also varied by age and income, with younger respondents and those making more than \$60,000 a year more likely to favour running the ads.”

opinion when it came to the question of the ads being allowed on buses, with 48% of respondents in favour, and 40% not in favour.²²⁵ This likely speaks to the issue of free expression, with some Canadians being in favour of allowing the ads to run on buses while being opposed to their message. Overall, however, the fact that the ads were controversial does show that the public expression of atheist sentiment is not unreservedly acceptable in Canada.

2.2.6.3 Follow Up

On December 6, 2010, the Centre for Inquiry Canada sent out a press release announcing its follow-up to the Atheist Bus Campaign. Borrowing a quote from Carl Sagan, the main ad featured the line “Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence” and included a list of extraordinary claims: “Allah Bigfoot UFOs Homeopathy Zeus Psychics Christ.”²²⁶ Of the campaign’s new focus, spokesperson Justin Trottier explained: “Broadening our focus from just God, now we’ll call for skepticism and rational inquiry into every conceivable Extraordinary Claim,” and an interactive website, along with public events, was created to educate the public.²²⁷ The ad was an attempt to broaden their message from simply that of disbelief in God to include scepticism and critical thinking on a wide range of issues in general:

This [ad and campaign] not only places atheist disbelief in the popular Christian god within the context of disbelief in gods generally but also within a broader attitude of skepticism and critical thinking.²²⁸

²²⁵ Ibid.

²²⁶ “Media Release: Canadian Atheist Bus Campaign Follow Up Launched,” <http://extraordinarybus.wordpress.com/2010/12/06/media-release-canadian-atheist-bus-campaign-follow-up-launched/>, Centre for Inquiry Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence, December 6, 2010, accessed January 23, 2014. Commas absent in original.

²²⁷ Ibid.

²²⁸ “Extraordinary Claims Wins Best Atheist Ad 2011!” <http://extraordinarybus.wordpress.com/2011/06/16/extraordinary-claims-wins-best-atheist-ad-2011/>, Centre for Inquiry Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence, June 16, 2011, accessed January 23, 2014.

It was successful in that it won About.com's Best Atheist Ad 2011 Award, but it failed to generate much media attention in Canada. In fact, when explaining the award, Austin Cline, writing on behalf of About.com's Readers' Choice Awards, explained:

Unfortunately [...] our Best Atheist Ad didn't get as much media attention as other finalists. I'm not sure how much of that is because of its less confrontational nature and how much is because it's been a Canadian campaign which hasn't appeared in America where there's a lot more conflict over atheism.²²⁹

On December 7, 2011, the *Toronto Star* reported that the Centre for Inquiry was still in the process of raising funds for the campaign, which was to begin in Toronto and spread across the country.²³⁰ The media coverage seems to be limited to anticipating the campaign; it appears from the lack of coverage that the campaign never extended past the press release, interviews, website, and public events, and onto Canadian city buses.

In December 2013 it was reported that the Centre for Inquiry had a new advertisement which was submitted to Pattison Outdoor for placement on billboard in Vancouver.²³¹ The ad, which features a picture of a smiling woman holding a cup of coffee, includes the words:

Jenn 13:1
Praying won't help. Doing will.
Centre for Inquiry Canada [Logo]
Without God. We're all good.
cficanada.ca²³²

CFI board member Pat O'Brien claimed the Centre for Inquiry was told by Pattison Outdoor that the ad was unacceptable and the Centre for Inquiry was considering making a human rights

²²⁹ Austin Cline, "Readers' Choice Awards, 2011: Best Atheist Ad 2011," http://atheism.about.com/od/aboutthenews/ss/Readers-Choice-Awards-2011_10.htm, About Agnosticism/Atheism, *About.com*, accessed January 23, 2014.

²³⁰ Lesley Ciarula Taylor, "New bus ads to take on Bigfoot, Christ: The atheist campaign on Toronto buses last year hit enough nerves to inspire a new campaign from the people behind it, this time taking on Allah, Christ, Bigfoot, homeopathy and psychics," http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2010/12/07/new_bus_ads_to_take_on_bigfoot_christ.html, *Toronto Star*, December 7, 2011, accessed January 23, 2014.

²³¹ "Atheist billboard ads rejected in Vancouver: Pattison Outdoor says changes to the ad were requested to reflect company guidelines," <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/atheist-billboard-ads-rejected-in-vancouver-1.2455156>, *CBC News*, December 7, 2013, accessed December 8, 2013.

²³² *Ibid.*

complaint.²³³ As of this writing there has been no further news reported in the mainstream Canadian media of the acceptability of the ad or of any subsequent human rights complaints (which would likely be made through the British Columbia Human Rights Tribunal).

While the Atheist Bus Campaign in Canada is useful for exploring the legal and social reactions to atheism in a specifically public Canadian setting (or settings), as well as reflect broader Canadian approaches to regulating religious diversity (and diversity of opinions) in public spaces, it also points to the global connections that exist when it comes to ‘atheisms’: the Canadian campaign was inspired by a British campaign that also inspired similar campaigns around the world. In fact, besides Canada, the British campaign inspired similar bus campaigns in The United States of America, The Netherlands, Finland, Croatia, Sweden, Germany, Spain, Russia, Brazil, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, and Italy, many of which used the “There’s Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying And Enjoy Your Life” slogan. Atheism therefore cannot only be considered in its local context – just as there are regional similarities and differences between reactions to the campaign across Canada, there are national similarities and differences between reactions to the campaign across the globe. The legal and social reactions from each of these campaigns reflect on popular and/or official narratives of inclusion and diversity for both theism and atheism.

As Peter Beyer has argued, an important feature of globalization is the emergence of differentiated function systems²³⁴ (the notion that economy, state, religion, law, media, art, etc. are separate from one another, where secularism is a process of differentiation). Since the structure of global society is reproduced in local settings, it is not surprising that localized

²³³ Ibid.

²³⁴ For an accessible summary of the historical development of differentiated function systems, see: Peter Beyer, *Religion in the Context of Globalization: Essays on Concept, Form, and Political Implication*, New York: Routledge, 2013.p.58-59.

atheists adopt international strategies, in essence framing atheism as a global movement. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to conduct a global assessment of atheism, it is certainly important to emphasise that the campaigns in different Canadian cities were local manifestations of a global phenomenon, and although those manifestations received different legal reactions, the public reactions primarily show indifference to the messages, but a desire to nevertheless allow the messages to run.

2.2.7 Multiculturalism and Atheism

While French, English (and, to a lesser extent, Native American) relations have always played prominently in federal politics, following World War II, the liberalization of immigration, and the implementation of official bilingualism, other ethnic groups demanded recognition for their contributions (especially cultural) to the developing country of Canada. On October 8, 1971, Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau responded to this call for recognition by implementing the world's first official "multicultural policy". This policy was implemented within a bilingual (English/French) framework, and it has become an important part of Canadian national identity. While this policy is extensively concerned with celebrating and safeguarding the cultures of ethnic groups, it has often come to refer to religious groups – especially minority religious groups – since the differentiation between religion and culture is difficult to define in a way that has universal application, and they often complement each other. Moreover, if one accepts that 'religion', by either a functional or a substantive definition, is part of or somehow linked to 'culture', then by definition 'multiculturalism' includes multi-religions. Of interest for this section, which is concerned with whether or not atheism is – or could be – included under the broad framework of national multiculturalism, is the fact that multiculturalism as an official

policy, at least when first implemented, was not limited to traditional groups, but was extended, philosophically at least, to individuals. When Trudeau announced the official policy on that October day in 1971 he made comments that point to multiculturalism as being extended to, or even ultimately about, individuals:

A policy of multiculturalism within a bilingual framework commends itself to the government as the most suitable means of assuring the cultural freedom of Canadians. Such a policy should help to break down discriminatory attitudes and cultural jealousies. National unity, if it is to mean anything in the deeply personal sense, must be founded on confidence in one's own individual identity; out of this can grow respect for that of others and a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions. A vigorous policy of multiculturalism will help create this initial confidence.²³⁵

If the goal of the policy (at least as stated by the Prime Minister when it was first introduced) is to instil “confidence in one's own individual identity,” so that respect flourishes alongside “a willingness to share ideas, attitudes and assumptions,” then it is difficult to imagine why multiculturalism does or should not include atheism, either in the form of cultural groups (clubs, communities, organizations) or as individuals who may or may not share anything else in common but the simple ‘denunciation of theism as a reality’, which is what the word means in a strictly definitional sense. The main point here is that even if in practice and implementation the policy is closely related to ethnicity and culture,²³⁶ the historical principles behind the policy's creation point at least to the *potential* for the inclusion of atheism.

Today religious and cultural diversity in contemporary Canada can be seen outwardly in many cities through the mixing of people of different backgrounds in day-to-day settings to enclaves of shared racial, ethnic, cultural, and religious commonalities. Both of these outward expressions of diversity in Canadian societies bring benefits as well as problems in terms of

²³⁵ John English, *Just Watch Me: The Life of Pierre Elliot Trudeau: Volume Two 1968-2000*, Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2009, 145-146.

²³⁶ Although culture, as noted, includes religion by implementation, this does not by default imply that the negation of religion is itself cultural, but in practice ‘atheisms’, especially when organized, are certainly culture-specific.

equality. One of the ways many Western countries, including Canada, have come to deal with increasing diversity is through the politicization of multiculturalism.

As Augie Feras and Jean Leonard Elliot (2002) explain, multiculturalism as a practice – as mixed cultures living in close proximity - is a social reality in Canada, but as a political theory advocating equality and civility between cultures it is a social experiment and the degrees of its effectiveness are debatable. According to Michael Adams, the experiment of multiculturalism is a success, with four out of five Canadians surveyed agreeing that multiculturalism “has contributed positively to the national identity.”²³⁷ He argues that this is partly due to immigrants conforming to Canadian social norms upon arrival: “Canadians know very well how to sustain their laws and their principles, and the vast majority of those who come to this country from elsewhere have no wish to dismantle them anyway.”²³⁸ Although Adams paints Canadian multiculturalism in a somewhat rosy light, when it comes to putting theory into practice it is not without its trials. This is especially evident when looking at the European situation, which has exhibited symptoms of a ‘multicultural backlash’ in recent years.²³⁹ Will Kymlicka argues that the European backlash, while a legitimate concern overseas, does not accurately translate into an

²³⁷ Michael Adams, *Unlikely Utopia: The Surprising Triumph of Canadian Multiculturalism*, (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2009), 86.

²³⁸ Adams, 204-205.

²³⁹ There is currently a great deal of discussion on the effectiveness of multicultural policy, particularly in Europe. Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf have addressed European criticisms of multiculturalism in their edited collection *The Multiculturalism backlash: European discourses, policies and practices*, which addresses simplified assessments of multiculturalism in practice. Vertovic and Wessendorf argue that while there has been an increased public “backlash discourse” against multiculturalism, that discourse has not manifested in a policy shift toward assimilation. The shift has been toward downplaying the term ‘multiculturalism’, but by and large the principles behind it – such as the value of cultural/ethnic accommodation – remain in place. This, however, does not mean that the backlash against multiculturalism, especially post-9/11, has not had some negative effects: “Relentless attacks on multiculturalism – and thereby on basic principles of accommodating cultural and religious difference – might not have changed the basis of policies radically, but they have certainly fomented a negative atmosphere surrounding immigrants, ethnic minorities and particularly Muslims” Steven Vertovec and Susanne Wessendorf, *The Multiculturalism backlash: European discourses, policies and practices*, (London: Routledge, 2010, 27). Examples of that negative atmosphere can be found throughout Europe, such as the French ban on the hijab and the rise of Dutch nationalist political parties, as well as through public discourse concerning immigration and questions of identity in many countries, such as Germany and England.

equivalent or prediction of Canada's present or future relations with multicultural policies. In fact, he argues that it is misleading to devise parallels from these differing situations:

long-time critics of multiculturalism have jumped on the European anti-multiculturalist bandwagon and have hoped to ride it into Canada, desperately looking for any shred of evidence that can be (mis)interpreted as proof that Canada is falling into European-style patterns of ethnic animosity and division. If we look at the evidence dispassionately, however, it is clear that ethnic relations in Toronto are not like those in Paris, Amsterdam or Bradford.²⁴⁰

Kymlicka's defense of Canadian multiculturalism is due to his perception of its strengths, which include: 1) Canadian pride in multiculturalism; 2) Canadian belief that immigration is beneficial; 3) high degree of immigrants becoming citizens; 4) success rate of children of immigrants; and 4) a lack of minority ghettos. While these strengths are unique to Canada, Kymlicka does acknowledge that multiculturalism does indeed have some issues that it still needs to work through. The most relevant of these for my purposes is the concept's inclusion, or lack thereof, of religious identity. Kymlicka notes: "The heated debates on religious family law arbitration and the funding of religious schools in Ontario, and the reasonable accommodation debate in Quebec, show that religion is now the most controversial domain of multiculturalism."²⁴¹ Indeed, it is often where religious freedoms meet secular restrictions that multiculturalism finds its most contentious debates. Yet, if multiculturalism as a policy reflects willingness on the part of the politic for sanctioned societal equilibrium, religious cultures certainly deserve to be validly recognized. Elke Winter advances this notion through her understanding of the ultimate purpose of multicultural policy.

²⁴⁰ Will Kymlicka, *The Current State of Multiculturalism in Canada and Research Themes on Canadian Multiculturalism 2008-2010*, Minister of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2010, 17.

²⁴¹ Kymlicka, 18.

Winter sees multiculturalism as a “modest remedy for collectively operating inequalities produced through nationalist group closure”.²⁴² Addressing the criticism that religious expression should be divorced from multicultural policy, Winter maintains that nationalism creates space for majority groups, while discriminating against members of ‘other’ ethnic, racial, and religious minorities; multiculturalism offers these minorities an opportunity to “identify with the nation and to redefine it from within.”²⁴³ As a policy, multiculturalism must therefore include religion, since nationalist groups naturally favor their own religion over others, and multiculturalism offers solution-making where such inequalities exist. If multiculturalism is to include religion, then it also has the potential to include atheism, as noted above.

Just as there are Canadian proponents of multiculturalism there are also its critics. Phil Ryan addresses the criticisms of multiculturalism in his book *Multicultiphobia*. The prominent critics Ryan responds to are Reginald Bibby, Neil Bissoondath, Richard Gwyn, and Jack Granatstein. Ryan explains that, collectively, they argue that multiculturalism harms individuals (i.e. by fostering moral relativism, conformity, and resentment); it harms cultures (by keeping them static or frozen; reducing them to “an object for display”); and it harms society (by “creating walls,” dividing loyalties, and weakening “collective life”).²⁴⁴ Ryan argues that while the critics of multiculturalism often exaggerate these “harms,” each of their concerns should be taken seriously and soberly discussed. While “the policy remains highly popular with Canadians”²⁴⁵ it is an ongoing discussion, according to Ryan, and he proposes that “the multicultural nourishing of the ethnic and religious cultures of Canada can proceed in tandem

²⁴² Elke Winter. “What can Weberian Sociology tell us about multiculturalism and Religion,” in Sonia Sikka and Lori G. Beaman (Eds.), *Multiculturalism and Religious Identity: Canada and India*, (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier Press, 2014), 211.

²⁴³ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁴⁴ Phil Ryan, *Multicultiphobia*, (University of Toronto Press, 2010), 41-42.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

with the multicultural nourishing of a shared Canadian culture, one that will itself sustain and deepen citizen identification.”²⁴⁶ In other words, as a policy multiculturalism does not need to be an ‘either or’ between retaining ones ethnic or religious cultural identity and assimilating to a Canadian identity; one can, and often does, do both.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to properly address the myriad ways multiculturalism is understood, (as diversity, governmental policy, ideology, etc.), it is important to acknowledge that, in Canada, the term is popular yet contentious; it reads like a straightforward explanation of a social reality, but it is difficult to define and controversial when implemented as policy. The reality of atheism as another culture living among many cultures in a religiously diverse Canada does not seem controversial. The application of multicultural policies (such as state funding, invitations to cultural celebrations), to an ‘irreligion’, however, may prove controversial.

In essence, there is no accessible official governmental list that points to which cultures multiculturalism includes and excludes (nor what traits constitute a ‘culture’). But it would be naïve to assume that multiculturalism as policy, and as a synonym for the reality of a diverse Canada, has no effect on how Canadian atheists presently view themselves and perceive of their situation(s) and relationships with other Canadians.

2.2.8 Summary

With regard to the official status of religion in contemporary Canada, politically speaking, there seems to be some contradiction. Politicians are expected to pay service to religion as long as such actions or words can also be understood as paying service to *our* Christian culture and history. But should a politician publicly cite his or her *personal* devotion

²⁴⁶ Ibid., 219.

to a specific religion, even Christianity, during a campaign he or she at least potentially runs a risk of being at a disadvantage come election day. While politicians may be unwilling to proclaim their atheism – assuming there are atheists in Parliament, a statistical likelihood – they also tend to avoid proclaiming their faith-based religiosities on the national stage (correspondence with faith-based or related interest groups being a notable exception, but for a specialized local audience rather than a general national audience).

On the legal front, atheists have been engaged with cases involving the removal of prayer and the cessation of Bible distribution in public schools, as well as the removal of prayer and religious symbols from town councils. Interestingly, the initial cases in which atheists were (or may have been) involved also involved religious minorities, which points to a religiously pluralistic co-operation on legal matters, although lately atheists have been at the forefront of initiating challenges on these specific issues, which has opened the door to them being portrayed as anti-cultural.

Atheists have also become quite engaged with active self-promotion, as is evident from the Atheist Bus Campaign, which raised many important issues, including the freedom of expression and the right to criticize, or promote, religion in public spaces. The initial rejection of relatively benign atheistic slogans by at least partially municipally-funded advertisers in a few cities hints at an ‘atheist stigma’, yet the acceptance of the same slogans in other cities without incident points to equality and acceptance, at least in terms of a shared right to constitutional freedoms.

The profile of atheism has certainly been on the rise; this is evident by the mainstream news media’s discourse on atheism in opinion articles, as well as their inclusion of atheist voices.

While atheism is not free from misrepresentation, atheists are free to correct those misrepresentations, either through the comment sections of publishers, or as guest columnists.

Finally, Canada's multicultural policy, as articulated by its initiator, Pierre Trudeau, shows us that atheists can make a legitimate claim to being equal members of the multicultural mosaic, although in practice and in theory multiculturalism as policy has proven to be complicated and contentious, more so with regard to the latter in Europe, although Canada certainly has its fair share of representatives for and against multiculturalism who could speak on the subject in both journalistic and academic tones. Yet multiculturalism, as polls show, is also considered a positive aspect of Canada's national identity.

2.3 Conclusion

This chapter focussed on the role of atheism both historically and in contemporary Canada. In the discussions leading up to the 1867 foundation of Canada there was some political will (and self-congratulations) behind the notion of religious tolerance, but that will extended primarily to those of 'Christian faiths' (French Catholic; English Protestants) who viewed those 'faiths' or denominations as different religions. The fact that tolerance did not extend to atheists, or at least the expression of atheistic opinions, is evident from the historical implementation of the blasphemy law.

Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma's receiving of citizenship, with the support of Parliament, shows that by 1965 the question of atheists being allowed citizenship had been solved, although prior to 1963 the question does not appear to have been one of public concern, nor was it a legal issue. Likewise, the blasphemy law had ceased to be enforced following *R. v. Rahard* in 1936. This is not to argue that atheism was socially acceptable, but it does point to atheists being

treated equally under the law, at least nominally. One area that spoke to a continued imbalance of treatment, however, was the practice of religion in public institutions.

Some atheists and/or non-religious actors began challenging prayer in public schools and town councils, as well as the distribution of Bibles in public schools and continued presence of religious symbols in governmental chambers. They have had both successes and failures on these fronts, and lately had their allegiances to national culture challenged by media and legal voices, particularly in Quebec, where the propagation of nationalism and the safeguarding of heritage are frequent concerns. It is too early to tell if this new caricature of the ‘anti-cultural atheist’ will stick and/or expand, and if so, how ‘active’ atheists will respond to counter that claim. What is clear, however, is that atheists are increasingly vested in expressing their opinions publically through initiatives such as advertising campaigns, organizational outreach, and commentary in news media.

The increasing statistical prevalence of atheists and religious nones offer a challenge to, and reflection of, the roles of religion in politics and the scope of multiculturalism as policy, theory, and reality in contemporary Canada. While this chapter has been concerned with uncovering the story of atheism in Canada from Confederation to the present day, another way to gain a sense of how atheism is situated in any given locale is to ask atheists themselves.

The thesis now shifts to an examination of an Ottawa-based university atheist community in order to gain an understanding of how a small group of individual atheists identify with atheism, particularly with regard to the perception, acceptance, and role(s) of atheism in Canada. The next chapter explains the methodological and theoretical frameworks utilized for the research and data analysis that follows in subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three: Herding Cats: Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks

*Although it is a personal process with undeniable psychological components, the rejection of religion is always culture-bound, playing out in specific social settings that greatly color and inform the phenomenon.*²⁴⁷

– Phil Zuckerman

*Irreligion can only be specified within a given social and cultural context.*²⁴⁸

– Colin Campbell

3.1 Why Study Atheism in Canada?

Atheism is a barometer for theism. Theism is a barometer for atheism. If you understand atheism in any given setting, you also understand the theisms of that setting, since atheism is a rejection of those theisms. Likewise, if one understands the ‘roles’ of atheism in a setting one gains a glimpse of the roles of theism, as Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann suggest in their study on American’s acceptance of atheists: “attitudes toward atheists tell us more about American society and culture than about atheists themselves”.²⁴⁹ On one extreme, if a theism is granted special status – Lutheranism in Finland,²⁵⁰ for example – atheism, by default, receives lesser status. The reverse is also true, as is evidenced by Soviet Russia during the Cold War. In fact, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, countries such as Russia have de-secularized and re-identified with theism, and atheism, as a result, has become controversial.²⁵¹

²⁴⁷ Phil Zuckerman, *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, (New York: Oxford University press, 2012), 171.

²⁴⁸ Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 29.

²⁴⁹ Edgell, Gerteis, and “Atheists,” 230.

²⁵⁰ See Teemu Taira, 2012, “More Visible but Limited in its Popularity: Atheism (and Atheists) in Finland,” *Approaching Religion*, 2(1):21-35. According to Taira, ‘Finnishness’ is connected to Lutheranism, and atheism has historically not been “considered to be part of what it is to be a proper Finn” (21): “In Finland one of the traditional bonds in need of re-justification is the connection between ‘Finnishness’ and the Lutheran Church in times of increased (religious and non-religious) diversity.” (33)

²⁵¹ Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment*, (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 1: “M]any nations of the former Soviet Union, which had atheism imposed upon them for decades, have emerged from the communist era with their faith not only intact, but strong

Across the globe discrimination against atheists is rampant. In 2012 The International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU) published *Freedom of Thought 2012: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists and the Nonreligious*. This report offers accounts of countries that have:

laws that deny atheists' right to exist, curtail their freedom of belief and expression, revoke their right to citizenship, restrict their right to marry, obstruct their access to public education, prohibit them from holding public office, prevent them from working for the state, criminalize their criticism of religion, and execute them for leaving the religion of their parents.²⁵²

Overall the report lists 60 countries. A few of the 26 European and countries in the Western hemisphere that made the list are France, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden. Canada made the list due to discriminatory hiring practices for publically funded religious schools such as Catholic schools in Ontario.²⁵³ Besides that, there were no noted cases of discrimination against any individual Canadians simply for being atheist (with the religious school issue, discrimination is leveled at non-Catholic religions as well).²⁵⁴ What is interesting is that there are no specific reported cases of discrimination against atheists in Canada in this report although

and vibrant.” See also: Teuvo Laitila, 2012, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Atheism,” *Approaching Religion*, 2(1): 52-57; 52: “After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the religious tide in Russia has been quick to rise. During the Soviet era, religion – particularly Orthodox Christianity and Islam – was considered to be one of the ‘enemies of the people’. Since the late 1990s however, Russian politicians at all levels of the power structure have associated themselves either with the Orthodox, or on some occasions with the Muslim, clergy.”

²⁵² Freedom of thought 2012: A global report on discrimination against humanists, atheists and the nonreligious, <http://iheu.org/files/IHEU%20Freedom%20of%20Thought%202012.pdf>, 9. International Humanist and Ethical Union. 2012.

²⁵³ Ibid., 52. “Ontario is the only province that funds Catholic religious education while providing no funding for other religious schools. One third of Ontario’s public schools (around 1,400) are Catholic schools, and they receive 100% of their funding from the government. Catholic schools discriminate against non-Catholics in hiring staff. Catholic schools can also exclude non-Catholic children.”

²⁵⁴ It should be noted that the reason for the public funding of select religious schools in Canada is certainly historically derived and has become status quo, at least in part due to the unpopularity of reopening the constitution. On the other hand, these schools definitely have their supporters, although the Ontario general election of 2007, in which Conservative candidate John Tory appealed to religious voters by promising to extend public funding to more religious schools and subsequently lost as that became the main campaign issue, points to a fear of some religions (principally Islam and Sharia Law) and/or a simple lack of public support for more faith-based schools. For a detailed account of the roles of religion and politics in Ontario public education, including an analysis of the mentioned election of 2007, see Leo Van Arragon, “We Educate, They Indoctrinate”: Religion and the Politics of Togetherness in Ontario Public Education, University of Ottawa, Ottawa, 2015.

there are discrimination cases listed for the United Kingdom and the United States, two of the most influential countries on Canada's historical, cultural, and political development.

While academic investigation on atheism is routinely being conducted in two countries that significantly influenced Canada's unique personality, little has been conducted on Canada itself, with a few notable exceptions, such as Amarnath Amarasingam (New Atheism; atheism and Tamil youth), Lori G. Beaman (atheism and law), Peter Beyer (atheism and identity), Stephen LeDrew (scientific and humanistic atheism), and William A. Stahl (atheism and secularism). Each of these academics have made important contributions to the study of atheism, but the study of specifically Canadian atheist organizations is currently lacking. Yet Canada, as with every country, is unique. It has a unique historical narrative and contemporary reality. One way to better understand both theisms and atheisms in Canadian society, as with any society, is to ask atheists themselves about their experiences. It is this route that I chose to take in my research.

3.1.1 Research Question

My original research question, which I refined over the course of my research, was two-fold:

1. What decision-making process prompts people to join an atheist community?
2. What are the beliefs and practices of atheist groups and their members?

My original hypothesis included, in part, that atheists who are active in atheist communities would tend to feel marginalized as a social group and therefore seek comfort in camaraderie. I expected to find that many 'involved' atheists have had negative experiences, including rejection, from 'coming out' as an atheist to loved ones. The initial ten interviews with members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO), revealed a few patterns which

contradicted and disproved my hypothesis and led to a new research question. I found that the interviewees did not perceive themselves as being marginalized. Nor were negative reactions from family, friends, and/or strangers, a serious concern. Instead the evidence pointed to atheists joining the ACUO so as to enjoy conversing with like-minded people in a safe-space which minimalized the chance of offending others. This notion, that one would join an atheist group as a means of minimalizing offence, seemed quintessentially Canadian, and as such it prompted me to formulate a new research question to better address this finding. The new question I wanted an answer to, and the driving question behind this thesis, is: “How do atheists construct their identities in the context of a religiously diverse Canada?” In order to answer this question I first needed to better understand what being an atheist means in terms of everyday life. For this I turned to the sociological approach of ‘lived religion’.

3.3 Theoretical Approach

3.3.1 Lived Religion

‘Lived religion’ is a sociological approach that emphasizes studying the ways people practice their beliefs at an ‘everyday’ level; it is concerned with looking behind the veil of official dogma in favour of understanding individualized beliefs and practices.²⁵⁵ In *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, Meredith McGuire emphasizes studying the ways people practice their beliefs at an individual level as opposed to the macrocosmic level of organized religion, the latter of which often speaks of ‘official’ doctrine but tells us little of everyday personal experience. Robert Orsi makes a similar case for studying religion and

²⁵⁵ Meredith B. McGuire, *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2008), 12. McGuire explains that her focus throughout *Lived Religion* is “on how religion and spirituality are practiced, experienced, and expressed by ordinary people (rather than official spokespersons) in the context of their everyday lives.”

spirituality on the personal level in his book *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them*, which explores the everyday religious beliefs and experiences of Catholics. For this thesis I extend this sociological approach to atheism. Examining an atheist community by emphasizing the opinions and practices of individual members offers a more accurate assessment of that community than relying on official publications and spokespersons. I focus on what atheism in Canada means to individuals who belong to an atheist community, as well as a comparative group of atheists who do not belong to an atheist community.

McGuire's and Orsi's sociological approach is a refreshing change from the academic search for metanarratives since lived religion focuses on what people *actually* do as opposed to what their affiliated organizations express they *should* do. The emphasis on delimiting religion from authority is particularly helpful for my study of atheism. In atheism, there are no authorized voices, at least in theory. My research thus explores the opinions of those who describe themselves as independent agents, free from authority, yet who nonetheless seek group affiliation. In *Lived Religion*, McGuire explains that, “[a]lthough lived religion pertains to the individual, it is not merely subjective. Rather, people construct their religious worlds together, often sharing vivid experiences of that intersubjective reality.”²⁵⁶ In the case of atheism, we may write rather of the social construction of an ‘irreligious world’, but the sentiment is the same. Lived religion is, according to McGuire, “fundamentally social” since its “building blocks are shared meanings and experiences, learned practices, borrowed imagery, and imparted insights.”²⁵⁷ My research topic stems from an interest to discover who atheists are, how they

²⁵⁶ McGuire, 12.

²⁵⁷ McGuire, 13.

construct their identities, and how they practice their beliefs, and the lived religion approach is a good way to broach these related interests.

Applying the concept of lived religion to atheism is not unprecedented, but it is relatively new. Lorna Mumford, for instance, has recently been studying “lived non-religious experience identified through fieldwork among members of local non-religious meeting groups in London, England,”²⁵⁸ and Peter Beyer, who has recently written about the fluidity of religious identity, calls the understanding and analysis of atheism at the level of the individual “lived atheism,” which he explains is concerned with “how individuals constitute atheism through their personal activity and consciousness”.²⁵⁹ Although he does not phrase his work as being about ‘lived atheism’, Phil Zuckerman, analyzes the life histories of American ‘apostates’ in his book *Faith No More, Why People Reject Religion*, which speaks to the lived experiences of those who transitioned from faith to nonbelief. While looking at atheism from the frame of lived religion is not unique to my study, it did raise some concerns when I originally considered it for this project.

One concern I had was reconciling the fact that while Orsi and McGuire focus on religion, my research explores atheist experiences. While I do not subscribe to the argument that atheism is a religion, I do think it has parallels, depending on one’s definition of ‘religion’, and only in the sense that both can shape, form, or contribute to individual or shared ‘worldviews’, and certainly not in any ‘supernatural belief’ sense.²⁶⁰ Since my interest is on how atheists live

²⁵⁸ Lorna Mumford, “Living Non-religious Identity in London,” in Lori. G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 153-170; 153.

²⁵⁹ Beyer, “From Atheist,” 137.

²⁶⁰ James Beckford, in his discussion on the socially constructed character of religious phenomena in *Social Theory and Religion*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), notes that, for social scientists, rather than focus on generic concepts of religion “it might be more productive for explanatory purposes to focus on categories of, for example, ideology, world-view, culture or ethnicity,” (Beckford, 19). The term ‘religion’ is often thought to encompass these categories, as well as many others, depending on one’s definition of ‘religion’. In this discussion my argument refers to a similarity between atheism and theism only in terms of the notion that a disbelief in a god or

their atheism – how their worldviews shape their experiences – I do not see a contradiction in using lived religion to study lived atheism. Since atheists define themselves in relation to religion I am drawing on studies of religious groups for inspiration as well as methodological and conceptual tools. It must be made clear, however, that my stance is not that atheism is in itself a religion, but that lived religion theory can be utilized to explore a variety of worldviews, including the belief that there is no God, as long as that belief directs people to act (or think) a certain way. The conflation of atheism with religion is not only a concern for those engaged in the study of ‘lived atheism’; it is something that any scholar of atheism needs to consider. For example, atheists may engage in activities that have long been in the religious realm but are not necessarily religious, or the ‘property’ of religion, such as ritualizing marriage, for example. Moreover, the labels ‘religious’ and ‘religion’ are not always clearly defined, and often bring with them a myriad of connotations.²⁶¹

gods, or a belief in a god or gods, will affect ones outlook on, interpretation of, and understanding of, nature and the universe, as well as humanity’s place within the cosmos – in other words, one’s ‘worldview’. For clarity, by highlighting the element of ‘worldview’ I am using a functional definition of religion. As Meredith B. McGuire explains in *Religion: The Social Context*, (Toronto: Wadsworth Group, 2002), “[f]unctional definitions often include as ‘religion’ phenomena such as nationalism, Maoism, Marxism, psychologism, spiritualism, and even atheism.” (McGuire, 12) For my purposes of argument I am following Clifford Geertz’s definition of religion as: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (McGuire, 11). It must be stressed that there are many other definitions of religion, and I chose Geertz’ specifically as an example of where theism and atheism may find similarity, not as a means of arguing atheism is religious in any other sense of the word besides the aforementioned notion of ‘worldview’. There are many substantive definitions of religions, for example, which include elements such as superhuman beings and “similar concepts, including ‘nonhuman agencies,’ ‘supernatural realm,’ ‘super-empirical reality,’ ‘transcendent agencies,’ and ‘sacred cosmos’” (McGuire, 9). When atheists, such as those mentioned in this thesis, refer to ‘religion’ they usually do so in terms of a substantive definition (i.e. a belief in the supernatural). I am not arguing that atheism fits into such a definition. For a good discussion on the problems of defining the term ‘religion’ and the various ways ‘religion’ has been defined see Linda Woodhead, 2011, “Five Concepts of Religion,” *International Review of Sociology*, 21(1), 121-143.

²⁶¹ The category of religion is contested, not just in terms of definition and the connotations that come with definition, but also in terms of its *usefulness* as a category and how it has *been used* as a category. Critical Religion theorists, such as Timothy Fitzgerald and Talal Asad, challenge the usefulness of religion as a category, and argue that the term ‘religion’ was a historical construction of the west during the colonial period, and that its uses are often, and have often been, political. See Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith have recently been engaged with atheist organizations in the United States and have identified some of their ‘rituals’ and how individual atheists who belong to American atheist organizations feel about those rituals.²⁶² They do not argue that this means atheists are therefore occasionally engaged in religious activity, or strive to become religious, but rather, that the desire for ritual is rooted in human nature, and it is being re-appropriated in atheist communities. In fact, the majority of atheist respondents to their internet survey who participated in atheist group activity “both confirm the positive role of ritual in their lives and deny any spiritual component to such.”²⁶³ In other words, there are elements from the study of religion which can be shared with the study of atheism, and the two need not be conflated.

Although I separate atheism from religion with regard to definition, I do not see them as polar opposites. I see similarities in that they are both concerned with answering why we are here, and the answers atheists and theists come to accept is likely to have an impact on how they live their lives. In other words, atheists and theists share common questions about the nature of reality and existence but come to different conclusions. The use of lived religion theory enabled me to gauge how the atheistic answers to those questions play a role in atheists’ related actions and practices and how they see themselves in the Canadian religious mosaic.

3.3.2 Identity

In *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, philosopher Charles Taylor explains the link between “identity and a kind of orientation”:

²⁶² Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secularist Rituals in the US: Solidarity and Legitimization,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 87-100.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, 97.

To know who you are is to be oriented in moral space, a space in which questions arise about what is good or bad, what is worth doing and what not, what has meaning and importance for you and what is trivial and secondary.²⁶⁴

Taylor also mentions that although we often frame our identities in terms of “universally valid commitments” (such as religion) and “particular identifiers” (such as nationality) “identity is deeper and more many-sided than any of our possible articulations of it.”²⁶⁵ Since this thesis examines the individual and collective identities of atheists it deals with one particularly relevant “commitment” that holds varying degrees of importance depending on the individual, but all see atheism as being *good*, and thus orient their moralities and agendas with that in mind, whether at the forefront of decisions or as an underlining guide. This does not mean, however, that atheists agree on areas such as best practices when it comes to engagement with the public, for instance, and even what agendas take priority within an atheist organization. Nor does it mean that all individual atheists agree on matters pertaining to atheism, or even how important being an atheist is to their identities.

Since this thesis engages with members of the ACUO it deals with group identification and orientation, but it does so with a focus on how the individuals collectively navigated priorities, controversies, and interaction with the public. As it moves into an analysis of interviews with both members of the ACUO and atheists who do not belong to any atheist communities it speaks to identifying as an atheist at the level of the individual before analysing the results as a whole.

At the individual level, religious, and by extension, atheistic, identity is fluid rather than rigid; shifting rather than unchanging.²⁶⁶ The interviews conducted for this thesis offer a

²⁶⁴ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 28.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 29.

²⁶⁶ See Beyer, “From Atheist,” and Smith, “Becoming an.”

snapshot of a moment in time, and while each interviewee presented the story of his or her religious dispositions it should not be assumed that those dispositions are exactly the same today as they were when the interview was conducted, nor should we assume they will necessarily change in a drastic fashion (i.e. that atheism is ‘just a phase’). We can, however, make comparisons with findings from other research with regard to the journeys atheists took to self-describe as such, how they came to join (or not join) an atheist organization, and how atheist communities collectively navigate differences and create group agendas (i.e. how they decide which issues and activities to collectively pursue).

While academic work on identity itself is quite common and informative, this thesis is concerned specifically with the atheistic aspect of individual identities, how their atheism informs how they understand themselves in the Canadian context, and how these individual identities come together from one shared identity trait (a disbelief in God) to exhibit a larger worldview with a greater audience, principally the public. The findings of scholars who have worked on atheist identities are presented and explained in more detail in chapters 4-9, which analyze the ACUO’s lifespan and the identity traits of atheists who belong to an atheist organization (compared with those who do not belong to any atheist organizations).

3.4 Methodological Approach

The broad topic of this thesis is contemporary atheism in Canada, and my specific focus is on how atheism is lived, experienced, and understood by atheists on the ‘ground’ level. My particular objective is to better understand contemporary atheism in the context of Canadian culture; by focusing my research on an atheist group in Ottawa and comparing their opinions to atheists who do not join atheist communities I was able to explore who some Canadian atheists

are, how they construct their identities as atheists, and address how atheism relates to the contemporary religious milieu in Canada. In order to achieve this objective this thesis utilized participant-observation field research and life history interviews.

Following the example of ethnographic sociologists of religion such as Susan P. Palmer, Nancy Ammerman, and Margarita A. Mooney, the first methodological strategy this thesis used was participant-observation field research. Previous research I had done for my Master's thesis, *In Science We Trust: Dissecting the Chimera of New Atheism*, which dealt with secularization, the interactions between science and religion, and so-called 'New Atheism', had made me familiar with the terminology that I was likely to hear from university-age atheists. Through that project I came to understand how the New Atheists conceptualized science as the most powerful force for secularization in the modern era, how their notions of science and secularization were complimentary of each other, with both being portrayed as opposed to religion, and how they had differences as well as similarities on some of the major themes which are present in their bestselling books. My familiarity with the terminology and arguments of New Atheism provided me with an understanding of the terminology and arguments used amongst atheists who were familiar with their writings. The President of the ACUO was one such atheist.

My approach to joining the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) was to first make contact with the President of the ACUO and clearly explain my research goals and my research plans. Following his interest and permission, I joined the club and attended the majority of community events over the following three years. My approach was to neither be coercive nor secretive, but to act as a member interested in documenting the club, akin to an official club biographer. I was open about my role as a researcher to the group in general as well as with each and every member with whom I interacted. With the permission of the President of

the ACUO I presented my research project at a meeting with the ACUO on November 9, 2011. Club members were made aware that I would be a participant-observer in their activities.²⁶⁷ As a participant-observer, from fall 2010 until spring 2013 I attended formal and informal club meetings (including ‘pub nights’ I attended 18 of 22 meetings); 3 debates; a ‘Reason Week’ event put on by the club, and a Pentecostal church service (members of the club were invited by a member of the church).

My second methodological strategy was to conduct 20 life history interviews with members of the ACUO followed by 20 life history interviews with Ottawa-area independent, or non-group-affiliated, atheists (NGAA). Life history interviews allow the researcher to see the trajectory of a person’s life around specific subjects; in this case the subject is atheism and the person’s past and present relationship with religion. As Ardra L. Cole and Gary J Knowles explain in *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, “[I]f life history inquiry is about gaining insights into the broader human condition by coming to know and understand the expressions of other humans.”²⁶⁸ Moreover,

Clusters and individual lives make up communities, societies, and cultures. To understand some of the complexities, complications, and confusions within the life of just one member of a community is to gain insight into the collective. [...E]very in-depth exploration of an individual life-in-context brings us that much closer to understanding the complexities of lives in communities.²⁶⁹

The life history interviews I conducted were useful for gaining an understanding of how the interviewees came to identify as atheists, as well as how their individual experiences spoke to the acceptance or stigma of atheism in their personal lives. This in turn provided insight into the ACUO as a collective, and why they pursued some group activities while abandoning others. During these interviews I explored the process by which individuals came to self-identify as

²⁶⁷ See Appendix II to read the points read to the attendees (written in the third person prior to the meeting) during that formal introduction.

²⁶⁸ Ardra L. Cole and Gary J Knowles, *Lives in Context: The Art of Life History Research*, Toronto: AltaMira Press, 2001, 11.

²⁶⁹ Ibid.

atheists, how they came to reveal their atheism to those close to them, why some chose to join an atheist community and others did not, and how they understood atheism in Canada. My interview questions are included in Appendix III.

One thing to be aware of when relying on data collected from in-depth life history interviews is that it is not a given that interviewees will always accurately recall the past events of their lives. As Phil Zuckerman explains in his book *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, in which he interviewed “people who have rejected their religion,” some interviewees, “when looking back on their lives in an attempt to explain their present identities” may “highlight certain details and downplay others [...as well as] inadvertently reconstruct events or embellish memories so that they are not accurate.”²⁷⁰ Zuckerman handles these concerns by pointing out that while data collection through life history interviews has the potential to include these ‘pitfalls’ it is still a valid, and perhaps the most accurate, means of learning about people’s personal religiosities:

While recognizing these potential pitfalls that come with relying upon people’s personal accounts of their own life stories as data, I still think that the best way to find out why people reject religion is to ask those individuals that have actually done so – to get the story directly from the horse’s mouth, so to speak.²⁷¹

I would only add to Zuckerman’s point about the usefulness of using “life stories as data” that while these ‘potential’ limitations are something to be aware of when gathering data from those who are looking back on their lives, I do not see this as necessarily a ‘pitfall’. In fact, it can be considered useful for my study in that the interviewees, even if misremembering or emphasizing particular events and diminishing others, nonetheless provide valuable input that relates to how they understand their contemporary relationship with theism and/or atheism,

²⁷⁰ Zuckerman, *Faith*, 12-13.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 13.

which in turn offers information on how they currently understand atheism in Canada, and by extension, how they perceive of themselves as atheists.

My research was conducted in two main phases. The first phase of my research was joining the ACUO and beginning participant-observation field research. This research continued until the ACUO no longer held official meetings and events. The second phase was conducting 20 life history interviews with members of the ACUO followed by 20 life history interviews with Ottawa-area atheists who do not belong to any in-person atheist communities.

Before each interview each interviewee read a description of my study and reviewed and signed a consent form (attached as Appendix IV). The length of each interview varied depending on how talkative each interviewee was, with some lasting approximately 45mins and a few lasting two hours. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed, after which pseudonyms were used and identifiable characteristics (such as the precise name of a hometown) were removed to protect the identity of the participants.

In order to solicit the participation of atheists who had no affiliation with any atheist organization I relied on snowball sampling. More specifically, I used the form of snowball sampling which Douglas Heckathorn termed respondent-driven sampling (RDS) and Mark S. Handcock and Krista J. Gile reframe as ‘link-tracing sampling’ (LTS). This was useful, because RDS/LDS snowball sampling “is a practical sampling method in hard-to-reach populations, beginning with a convenience sample, but it aims to approximate a probability sample over time.”²⁷² My intent was to gain a sense of probability from the general population as opposed to analyze the relationships between those who linked me to other atheists. When people showed

²⁷² Mark S. Handcock and Krista J. Gile, 2011, “Comment: On the Concept of Snowball Sampling,” *Sociological Methodology*, 41: 367-371, 369. An alternative method of snowball sampling, for comparison, has as its intent an analysis of the social circles that snowball sampling reveals; see: Steven K. Thompson, *Sampling*, (New York: Wiley, 2002), 183.

interest I e-mailed them an invitation explaining the main purpose and some details of the study.²⁷³ Some participants came from convenience samples, from a store worker with whom I briefly mentioned my study who passed on my contact information to her atheist friend, to an atheist I met at the reception of a political convention. During the course of my fieldwork I gave numerous public presentations about atheism and my research. A number of times people approached me after my talks and offered their contact information and expressed an interest in being interviewed. I began arranging for interviews with those who approached me and asked to be interviewed, as well as requests which came in from those who became aware of my work through word of mouth, and those whom I had just met but expressed interest in my area of study because they either were an atheist or knew someone who was an atheist. Following each interview I invited the participant to identify other potential interviewees amongst his or her friends and contacts, and requested that they forward those friends an invitation to participate in my research.

I met most of the participants in a coffee shop on the first floor of a campus building, and then invited the participant to a smaller, private interview room in the same building. A few interviews were conducted in other locations, at the request of and for the convenience of the participants.

The interviews were then transcribed verbatim, and while reading over the transcripts for a period of close to two years I coded for recurring themes and the interviews were subsequently coded according to those themes. In some instances the data surprised me, either from the outset or as patterns and themes began to emerge during the coding process. These patterns include an infrequency of receiving negative reactions due to being an atheist, a tendency to discuss atheism

²⁷³ The invitation which was distributed to interested atheists who do not belong to any atheist communities can be read in Appendix V.

in the United States rather than Canada, and the notion that joining the ACUO was commonly considered a means of engaging in religio-criticism while not offending religious adherents.

Reading the transcripts was an ongoing process, and from those readings I selected a few themes which I believed would express the Canadian atheist experience. I then developed a coding matrix which documented the recurrence of these themes as well as demographic information on each participant. The final broad themes I coded for were: 1. The process by which interviewees came to identify as atheists; 2. Why some atheists joined an atheist community while others did not; 3. How the interviewees perceive the Canadian public and media understanding of atheism; 4. Unprompted comparisons and discussions of the United States when a question specifically about Canada was asked; and, 5. The type and frequency of receiving a negative reaction or response simply for being an atheist. The fourth theme was particularly surprising as I had not expected so many unprompted comments about the state of atheism in the US when asking questions pertaining to Canada. That finding points to a lack of understanding about atheism's place in Canada, a lack of interest and thus concern regarding atheism in Canada, or elements of both of these aspects.

3.4.5. Limitations

For pragmatic reasons this thesis is limited in certain areas, and that comes with both its benefits and its drawbacks. Had I studied every atheist group in Ottawa in greater detail, my thesis would have better represented Ottawa's atheist community as a whole and perhaps painted a larger (or more vivid) picture of atheism in Canada's capital city. However, this would not have allowed for as detailed a focus on or analysis of the ACUO. By becoming acquainted with this one group and focusing on them with great detail over an extended period of time, using

participant-observation and life history interviews, my research unearthed some interesting and informative data. When I interviewed the second group and discovered their similarities with responses, I realized that my detailed but narrow focus raised further questions as well as offered a few potential answers. The data obtained by this approach certainly shows some surprising attitudes and feelings among this small sampling of atheists in Canada and points to some interesting and contemplative directions for further research.

3.6 Conclusion

This thesis asks how atheists construct their identities in the context of a religiously diverse Canada. It does so through an analysis of the opinions of individuals who belong to an atheist community in Ottawa in comparison to individual atheists who do not belong to any atheist communities. In order to focus on the individuals within a community rather than official narratives it takes a sociological approach to theory and utilizes the concept of ‘lived religion’, re-applying it to ‘lived atheism’. Methodologically it utilizes participant-observation ethnography and life history interviews to explore the actions and opinions of the atheist community as a whole, as well as that community’s individual actors. It also utilizes life history interviews of Ottawa-area non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA) who do not belong to any active atheist communities that meet in person. This second interview sample was initially meant to be used primarily for comparative purposes, but as I did my coding and analysis it became apparent that, with a few exceptions, there were no major differences between groups in terms of how their atheist identities were constructed. The approach I have taken to explaining the themes that arose from both sets of interviews is to report on them separately, but, except for those few areas of difference, discuss their findings collectively.

The next chapter is based on participant-observation and it both explores and analyzes the lifespan and activities of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa. The chapters that follow are based on themes derived from interviews with members of that community as well as the NGAA sample.

Chapter Four: Nonreligion in Action: The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa

Reason Week was a front to insult every religion you can insult and make a big scene. I was embarrassed [...] Why do you make it your goal to, to go and offend people? [...] Reason Week was not reasonable.

– Alison, 26, undergraduate student in Sociology

I think one of the main purposes of Reason Week was to gain visibility and I think we certainly accomplished that. [...] Reason Week we got some people to sign up. We got some, some people you know ah, to become aware of our group.

– Glen, 18, undergraduate student in Chemistry

As an emerging area of research, the study of atheism in contemporary society includes few in-depth explorations of the activities of atheist groups. One notable exception to this is the work of Jessie M. Smith, who had conducted participant-observation and interviews with American atheists. Smith has written that “organized atheism is not merely the coalescence of individuals around a single issue: their lack of belief in a god. Rather, it tends to involve and imply a host of other social and political issues, and other goal/value-oriented activities.”²⁷⁴ The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) fits this description, although the social and political issues they engaged with were limited to abortion rights, freedom of expression, and religious criticism (primarily Christianity and Islam). Smith also notes that the “interplay between atheists seeking both a defined community and a meaningful change in how the public views that community is at the core of their collective identity” and that “a narrative of difference, combined with an acknowledgment of shared values, serves to strengthen group

²⁷⁴ Jesse M. Smith, 2013, “Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 52(1):80-99, 86.

boundaries and self-understanding.”²⁷⁵ This is also the case with the ACUO, as they engaged in two ‘interfaith dialogue’ debates that put them alongside religions on equal footing while differentiating themselves through presentation and discourse. They also created a week-long event called Reason Week, the purpose of which was to engage with the public and explain atheism to fellow university students.

Smith’s work speaks to the experiences of American atheists, and while there is some correlation with the ACUO there are also some stark differences (Smith viewed “the notion of an atheist group as a ‘support group’ for ‘ex-believers’, for example, as carrying “some weight,”²⁷⁶ whereas with the ACUO that simply was not the case). As such his work is used throughout this chapter for comparative purposes, as is the work of other American scholars on collective atheism, such as Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith.

This chapter begins with a discussion of the locational context of the ACUO with a brief historical overview. It then looks at the main events of which the club were engaged before concluding with an analysis of how these events speak to the ACUO’s identity as atheists trying to create space for themselves on a religiously diverse campus.

4.1 Locational Context and Historical Overview

The University of Ottawa is a research-intensive university with a student population of over 40,000 students located in Ottawa, Ontario, the capital city of Canada. Ottawa is the fourth largest city in Canada and is ranked third in the world on the Numbeo quality of life index which compares cities based on the cost of living, purchasing power, housing affordability, pollution,

²⁷⁵ Ibid., 96

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 87.

crime rates, health care, and traffic.²⁷⁷ Unemployment is low, and the population is diverse.²⁷⁸ According to the 2011 census, 20% of the population are foreign born and 23.7% are visible minorities (The most common groups are, in order from most populous to lowest, Black, Chinese, South Asian, Arab, Southeast Asian, Filipino, Latin American, West Asian, Korean, and Japanese). The most common religious categories of identification are (in order from most populous to lowest) Christian, No religious affiliation, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, and Traditional (Aboriginal) Spirituality.²⁷⁹

The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO)²⁸⁰ came into being in 2010 when three individuals looked for a student atheist club to join at the University of Ottawa and could not find one. The three, Brendon, Donovan, and Colin,²⁸¹ shared the belief that there was a need for a place where like-minded atheists could meet which would also provide a space for atheism to be more vocal on campus since they were of the opinion that, as Brandon later explained, religion was “bad for humanity and detrimental to the progress of humanity.” Brandon thought that such a group would provide a place for people questioning their faith as well as offer condolences for those who are “on the brink” of identifying as an atheist to “reach out to.” Donovan expressed surprise that a university, “where people are smart” did not already have such a group. The third co-founder, Colin, explained that his involvement was based on the desire “to meet like-minded people.” Prior to the clubs formation his social circle had consisted

²⁷⁷ “Quality of Life Index Rate,” http://www.numbeo.com/quality-of-life/rankings_current.jsp, Numbeo, accessed April 6, 2015. “Quality of Life,” <http://www.numbeo.com/quality-of-life/>, *Numbeo*, accessed April 6, 2015.

²⁷⁸ By ‘diverse’ I do not mean that cultures and religions are proportionately equal, but rather, that Ottawa contains many distinct cultures, religions, and ethnicities – it is not a monoculture.

²⁷⁹ “NHS Profile, Ottawa, CV, Ontario, 2011,” <http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/details/page.cfm?Lang=E&Geo1=CSD&Code1=3506008&Data=Count&SearchText=Ottawa&SearchType=Begins&SearchPR=01&A1=All&B1=All&Custom=&TABID=1>, *Statistics Canada*, April 28, 2014, accessed April 6, 2015.

²⁸⁰ As with all official student clubs at the University of Ottawa, the ACUO was an officially bilingual club, and many of its members, especially those who grew up in or around Ottawa, were bilingual. In practice, however, the club conducted events in English, and conversed in English, so I am using its English name, which was how it was referred to by its members.

²⁸¹ All names, unless otherwise noted, with permission, because they are publicly available, are pseudonyms.

mainly of people who were “really Christian” and “in the military, and I was like God, I can’t stand these people. They’re ridiculous!”

To facilitate the formation of an atheist club, the co-founders posted a message on an online University of Ottawa club page listing to see if there were any students interested. They found that there was interest and contacted the Secular Student Alliance to become an affiliate. The Secular Student Alliance provided them with a “Group Starting Kit.” They then wrote a constitution, which read, in part:

ATHEIST COMMUNITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

CONSTITUTION

Article 1: Name

The club’s official name will be “The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa.” No other name will be used in the advertisement o[r] representation of the club.

Article 2: Club Mandate

The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) is dedicated to the promotion of the irreligious community, skeptical discussion, free inquiry, church-state separation, and secular ideals at the University of Ottawa.²⁸²

I now turn to a summary of the three year history of the formal meetings and activities of the ACUO, the purpose of which is to contextualize the club and its main events. Those events will be explored and analyzed in greater detail in the section that follows this historical overview.

I first met members of the ACUO at the beginning of September 2010. They were ‘tabling’ during the university’s 101 Week. By tabling I am referring to sitting at a table next to other clubs with recruitment and promotional materials. At that time they had managed to sign up about a dozen members.

The first official meeting I attended had thirteen attendees. Six were female and seven were male (including me). The meeting started with each member explaining how he or she

²⁸² This version of the constitution is from September 2012.

“became” an atheist; this was basically a brief self-explanation of everyone’s religious background.²⁸³ While there was some discussion of the stigma associated with atheists in relation to caring for other members of society and an off-hand discussion of donating stem cells, the bulk of the meeting was spent sharing laughter over YouTube clips, primarily what would become known as “hitchslap” videos (slang for a collection of clips of Christopher Hitchens at his wittiest) as well as Richard Dawkins being interviewed by Bill O’Reilly. In the months that followed more males than females showed up at meetings, to an approximate average of thirteen men to seven women for any given event by the end of the year. Meetings often began with a discussion of official agenda and event planning, shifted into Youtube clip viewing (humorous ones but also inspirational or awe-evoking ones such as clips of Carl Sagan talking about the grandeur of existence) and ended with a few drinks at a bar or a member’s apartment. The emphasis on humour reflects the findings of Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith in their study of atheist and secular humanist meetings: “Almost every secular humanist and atheist meeting we attended began with a session devoted to poking fun at the foibles of religious groups and people, or with a performance of music satirizing religious themes.”²⁸⁴

In order for the ACUO to maintain its official status (and thus get funding) it needed to hold at least one event each semester. The club agreed that a debate on the existence of God would be a good first event. To that end, the club president sent out an email²⁸⁵ to campus

²⁸³ When it was a tall blond fellow who sat at the back’s turn, he said he was Baptist and just came to our meeting “to watch.” He then immediately left. When he left everyone had a good laugh and tried to remember if they said anything rude about religion, besides making the odd joke or comment they would stand behind in front of an audience. They clearly did not want to be seen, even by an “outsider”, as intolerant, but they nonetheless thought religion was worthy of ridicule.

²⁸⁴ Cimino and Smith, “Secular,” 420.

²⁸⁵ Club email sent November 3, 2010: “To whom it may concern, [...] I am the president of The Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO). As we all know each club must hold at least one public event per semester to maintain club status at the University of Ottawa. I would like to extend an invitation to formally debate myself and other members of my club under the motion: “God Exists”. [/] The debate will be held in a public forum on campus and will be open to the public, it will also have a moderator. One panel of three will be “for the motion”

religious clubs and they eventually arranged a debate with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students' Association and the United Church of Canada. The Centre for Inquiry, contacted by the ACUO, arranged for a speaker to represent the atheist side. The collaboration with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students' Association proved fruitful, as both clubs participated in another debate a few months later on the topic, "Founders of Religion." Other events during the first year of the group's existence included a visit to the Museum of Natural History and Yuk Yuk's (a comedy club) – both of which were local and served as a good way for the members that attended to get to know each other on a more personal level. During the summer things were pretty quiet in terms of club meetings and activities,²⁸⁶ although discussions on Facebook remained quite active.

The second academic year for which the club was active began with a formal meeting on October 6, 2011, which was a basic meet-and-greet with a mix of members new and old (the official email list had 49 members). It was announced that the Facebook page was now closed so as to "prevent others from knowing you are affiliated with an Atheist organization (some people would like to keep this private and we respect their situation)".²⁸⁷ The group's activities accelerated during this second year and they decided to do more public outreach, which they

and the opposing panel of three will be "against the motion". Myself and the members of my club are against this motion. If your organization is for the motion and would like to field a panel to challenge us we would be more than happy to host you and yours in this joint event. Further elaborations on your particular religious beliefs and claims can and I assume will be made during the debate. This isn't merely a question of Deism, but Theism as well. [/] I am hoping the debate could be held in late November or early December. Further details and conditions can be discussed once I know whether or not your organization is interested in participating, after this primary correspondence is complete we can work out details that please everyone. [/] Thank-you."

²⁸⁶ At one point, however, there was serious talk of going on an overnight white water rafting trip with members of the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship. Things were arranged with a tour group and dates set for August, but then the Inter-Varsity Christian Fellowship contact clarified that it would be a male only event: "Glad to hear that you are interested in inviting your guys to go rafting with us. I think it would be a great and fun way to start dialogue between our group and yours. Just an fyi, I am running some specific events just for guys this year to try to meet more on campus (our group has more women currently) so as you invite your folk know I only want to bring the dudes. sorry." Once that stipulation was posted to the Facebook ACUO events page interest from members of the ACUO immediately waned as members of the ACUO found it to be sexist. As one initially interested member wrote on Facebook, "I would [go], but I'm lacking funds and a penis." This shows that although the club was interested in joint activities with religious clubs they were not willing to participate in anything that went against their values, in this case, for gender equality.

²⁸⁷ Club email sent September 6, 2011.

focussed toward the planning of an event called “Reason Week,” the purpose of which was to promote “scepticism, secularism, and the scientific method (including scientific facts).”²⁸⁸ Also that year the group rallied around the Vice President when he decided to accept an open invitation to argue the pro-choice side of a debate on abortion.²⁸⁹ This school year held more meetings than the first year (five formal and five informal, compared to three formal the year prior), and the impression members had of the club was certainly one of growth. At any given event or meeting approximately 12-20 members usually made an appearance, and more often than not the meetings would be followed by trips to a local pub or someone’s apartment for an informal party. In fact, about half of the meetings started to take place at pubs as opposed to booked classrooms on campus.²⁹⁰ Although a few of the members were certainly fond of social drinking, non-drinking members often partook in those social gatherings as well.

Following Reason Week in Spring 2012 there was an undercurrent of a ‘philosophical’ spilt between some of the most active members, in terms of the club’s agenda. Some members were content with the social aspect of the group and were not interested in activism or outreach, while others felt that it was important for the group to have a public voice of some sort. This did not result in a physical splintering of the group, but ultimately it would seem the former side won, in that through the summer and the following year the group acted as more of a social club than one interested in activism. There were no more debates and Reason Week failed to materialize for a second time. The club also went through a few presidents beginning with the first president stepping down in the winter of 2012.

²⁸⁸ Club email sent November 22, 2011.

²⁸⁹ Although it was not an official club event the Vice President solicited the club for support and some members of the club subsequently became interested in countering pro-life posters, which were plastered around campus, with their own ACUO pro-choice posters. More on this below.

²⁹⁰ Conversing over alcohol became a bit of a running joke amongst some of the members, with the co-founder authored meme “We’re a drinking club with an atheism problem” making the rounds in person, on Facebook, and even into some of my early interviews from 2012.

The final year in which the club held face to face meetings began with the second “Sexy Heathen Pub Night” which was subtitled “Back to School Edition.” The first Sexy Heathen Pub Night occurred in mid-summer, and its sequel in September would turn out to be the last of the series. In the first email to club members on the email listserve (who now numbered 109 – an increase of 65 members from the previous year) for that semester; the ACUO Public Relations Officer gave the following welcome:

Hello atheists, agnostics, theists, and others of contrary views, welcome to the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO)! Join us in promotion of reason, science, and the separation of church and state, as we meet throughout the year to relax at pubs and find amusement in the latest of religious irrationalities, but also to soberly realize the unending harm to humanity from superstition and dogma. We have multiple events coming up, most important of which is our first full club meeting, open to all on Wednesday, October 3, at 6pm.²⁹¹

Besides meetings with brainstorming sessions for events such as presentations and a second Reason Week which never occurred, and pub nights, which did occur, there was only one event that took place. It was a movie night which took place on October 5, 2012. It was meant to be the first of many – a small trial before arranging a major movie night open to the public – but it turned out to be a sole occurrence. It consisted of less than a dozen members watching Richard Dawkins’ “Faith School Menace” (a documentary on faith schools in the United Kingdom) and a BBC Panorama news clip called “British schools, Islamic Rules” in a closed campus café that the club managed to book. This was followed by an impromptu (yet predictable) apartment party. The final ACUO “meeting”, which took place on April 28, 2013, was entitled “Fuckyeah, exams are over. Booze in your face time.”²⁹² Members shifted from arranging and attending formal meetings to simply getting together as friends whenever they felt like it, through last minute texts rather than formally announced arrangements. Despite the end of formal meetings, a fading of

²⁹¹ Club email sent September 9, 2012.

²⁹² The final club president described the event on the Facebook Events page as: “NOT PICKING A DATE OR TIME!!!!!! It'll be tonight, tomorrow, or friday. Tell us when you can come otherwise you'll be shit outta luck if it doesn't work for you. Speak now or forever hold your peace.” As this suggests, members of the club seemed to have lost interest in the ‘atheism’ part of the club, instead focusing on the socializing aspect.

interest in the club, and its dissolution, many of the relationships made through the club have remained strong.

4.2 Main Events

This section provides a more detailed examination of some of the key activities of the ACUO. The purpose of this discussion is to explore and analyze how atheists expressed their atheism on a religiously diverse campus.

4.2.1 “Does God Exist?” Debate (2010)

On December 7, 2010, just a few months after officially receiving club status, the ACUO, in collaboration with the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students’ Association and the United Church of Canada, organized an interfaith colloquium at the University of Ottawa. The title of the colloquium, which took the form of speeches followed by an audience member question and answer session, was “Does God Exist?”

There were three speakers who represented Christianity, Atheism, and Islam, each of which, respectively, gave a twenty minute speech which was followed by a question and answer session, closing remarks, and refreshments. Reverend Dr. John R. Montgomery, of the United Church of Canada, represented Christianity. He described himself as a progressive Christian who takes the Bible “seriously but not literally.” Xander Miller, a founder of the Centre for Inquiry Ottawa and the Ottawa Skeptics, as well as a board member of the Humanist Association of Ottawa and podcast host (*The Reality Check*), represented atheism. Mr. Ansar Raza, an Ahmadiyya Muslim, missionary, and scholar who also appears on a radio show (*Radio Ahmadiyya*), represented Islam.

The pamphlet for the event prominently displayed the phrase “Understanding, Tolerance, Peace,” and the back of the pamphlet read:

Through the unifying vehicle of interfaith dialogue and respectful interaction we can make the world a better as well as a safer place to live in. It is only natural for us to try to bring various religions and cultures closer to each other and promote world peace to create an educational, interesting and friendly atmosphere.²⁹³

Overall, the debate went smoothly; while panelists certainly disagreed on the question of God’s existence the event unfolded without any major incidents, nor was there any distracting heckling. After the event, the ACUO members with whom I spoke felt that the presentation went well. Their comments included criticism of Miller’s organization of thoughts, the feeling that the Christian presentation was not representative of most Christians, and they found the Islamic explanation for the existence of God to be unconvincing.

The audience of approximately 100 to 125 people seemed to be a fairly even mix of atheists, Christians and Muslims of different ages; in other words, a mirror image of the panelists in terms of faith or lack of faith. During the debate the audience was urged to write down questions on supplied paper. Those questions were later collected and a selection of them were presented to the panelist to whom they were directed. Following the debate I asked for, and received, the complete pile of questions as I thought they might provide insight into the audience in terms of perspectives and concerns.

Categorizing the questions, it becomes clear that seven audience members directed questions to Xander Miller (representing Atheism); twelve audience members directed questions to Mr. Ansar Raza (representing Islam); and fifteen audience members directed Questions to Reverend Dr. John R. Montogemery (representing Christianity). My categorization of the questions is included in the following tables (please note that A1/A2 and B1/B2 refer to the same

²⁹³ Advertising, including the pamphlets, were commissioned by the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students’ Association.

questioner – questioner “A” or questioner “B”, both of whom asked two questions which were directed to different panelists):

Table 2: Questions for all participants

Questions directed to Xander Miller (representing Atheism), Reverend Dr. John R. Montgomery (representing Christianity), and Mr. Ansar Raza (representing Islam)
[1.] For the religious, if God exists, why is it that the events on Earth are unfolding without any ‘divine’ presence?
[2.] For the atheist; if there is no God, what is the purpose to our existence?
Why does the historical notion of god/God tend to have a gender bias?
For each of the speakers, could you tell us which point on the opposing side you find most compelling? (i.e., for the religious speakers, what is the most compelling argument for atheism? And for the atheist speaker, what is the most compelling argument for belief in God?)

Table 2.1: Questions for Miller

Questions directed to Xander Miller (representing Atheism)
If God does not exist what is your own notion of your existence?
If there is no God how do you explain the complexity of nature?
I do not say that God exists but explain to me what your view is of Nature? What is Nature? Or Natural Law? What is your view about Natural Law being almost a perfection? Hydro cycle, weather etc.
[Comment – seems directed at atheists:] While listening to the 3 gentlemen, I could not but ask myself “who” could be so ‘bright’ to put together such a system of coordination “the human” that can talk, see, walk, etc., all in one flesh – God – maybe?

Table 2.2: Questions for Raza

Questions directed to Mr. Ansar Raza (representing Islam)
You claim that God exists through prophecies and each one has detail. But yet some of the prophecies are open ended. For example, “the people gather together.” This could mean anything or different things to different people. Explain.
I fail to see how these prophecies have enough details. The same prophecy can mean 100 different things. If you think there is enough details why can’t you make a prediction of an upcoming event?
[A1.] No DETAILS were provided in any of the prophecies.
[B1.] Prophecies are not solid evidence to say Allah is God.

Table 2.3: Questions for Montgomery

Questions directed to Reverend Dr. John R. Montgomery (representing Christianity)
If, as you claim, God is being; that is, God is beyond existence, how can you answer the questions at hand?
So can we or can we not define god and if not wouldn't that be running away from the problem?
If "God" is an experience, who is the arbiter of what counts as a valid experience? Thank you
"I believe that 'God' is a way of being."
Can that mean then that whether Christian, Muslim or Atheist, we can all believe in the same "God" or state of being?
Neuroscience has developed rational explanations for strongly-experienced emotions and their origins in evolution. Why is it preferable to defer to internal conviction that is a consequence of these symptoms, thereby accepting a universe that must be more complex due to the existence of 'god'?
[A2.] Christianity: If God is not a being it is being, what is the point of prayers, and what does this statement say about "Jesus"?
[B2.] Does Postmodern world mean new understanding of God? So what do you say to those who do not have the Postmodern view?

Table 2.4: Questions for Montgomery and Raza

Questions directed to both Reverend Dr. John R. Montgomery (representing Christianity) and Mr. Ansar Raza (representing Islam)
Human beings have existed for at least 100,000 years on Earth, why has the loving God allowed thousands of generations to die in ignorance, and pain, before offering his revelations and salvation to humanity?
Islam says Jesus was not the son of God. Christianity says he was. Therefore, do the Christian and the Muslim agree that one of you must logically be preaching a falsehood to 1.5 billion people?
To Mr. Ansar Raza and Rev. John Montgomery. If God exists, is God nature? Or [is] God above nature? And why?
[1.] If a "false god" is one with limits, then doesn't religion work against [G]od by describing it and dictating how to worship it?
[2.] If your god is not an intellectual being who created the universe and all in it, why call it God?
[1.] If one assumes that a purportedly holy book need not be taken literally in its entirety, then by what standard is commitment to a religion measured? Would there not be a slippery slope where anyone can be considered equally "Christian" or equally "Islamic", since anyone can view a book metaphorically?
[2.] Are people like Pope Benedict, who opposes the ordination of women, or groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which has called for suicide-bombing against Israelis, accidentally influential in their respective religions or do they truly represent them?

These questions revealed the strong presence of critical thinking among the audience members. The audience was engaged and no subject seemed to be off limits, yet the questions seemed respectful if sometimes quite critical, and each presenter in turn answered them in a serious, respectful manner. In other words, as the pamphlet for the event suggested, the presenters and the audience, though coming to the debate with different and often contrary worldviews, engaged in “respectful interaction” in an “educational, interesting and friendly atmosphere.” Following the debate many of the audience members conversed with each other, getting to understand each other’s views better over a small reception.

While debates on God’s existence commonly include an atheist presenter, the next debate the ACUO participated in was less typical in terms of atheist involvement.

4.2.2 “Founders of Religions” Debate (2011)

Following the “Does God Exist” debate, the ACUO accepted an invitation from the Ahmadiyya Muslim Students’ Association (sponsored by said association and Hillel Ottawa: The Foundation for Jewish Campus Life) to participate in another debate, this one taking place at Carleton University on the topic: “Founders of Religions”. This time Scott,²⁹⁴ the president of the ACUO at the time, decided to speak on behalf of atheism.²⁹⁵

The event took place on February 9, 2010. It was advertised as a “World Religions Conference,” and the pamphlet described Scott as the ACUO President and “an undergrad student pursuing B.Sc. in Physics with a minor in Classical studies.” His debating opponents

²⁹⁴ Since Scott has been published with the title of President of the ACUO, and participated in this public debate with his real name, there is no sense in protecting his identity here – it is publically available. Scott Keith has granted permission to use his real name for this discussion.

²⁹⁵ From talking with Scott prior to the event I was well aware that he did not consider atheism a “faith” or to have any explicit founders, but he did see it as an opportunity to share his opinions on religion, and he decided to focus his presentation on the origins of religious skepticism.

were: Cantor Daniel Benlol, “Cantor for Congregation Beth Shalom of Ottawa, fluent in French, English, Arabic, and Hebrew [who] attended the Rabbinical College of Canada”; Chris Hutton, “Lead Pastor at the Meeting House in Ottawa, [who] holds a Bachelor’s and Master’s degree in English Literature and Religious Studies from Waterloo”; and, Muhammad Afzal Mirza, “Religious Minister for the Ahmadiyya Muslim Community, a learned speaker with great knowledge, and a graduate from the Ahmadiyya Muslim University in Rabwah, Pakistan”.²⁹⁶

The event began with readings from each debater’s respective ‘Holy Books’. Since atheism lacks such a book, Scott opted to read an argument historically attributed to Epicurus, introducing it by saying that it was “as meaningful” today as it likely was “in the fourth century [BCE]”:

Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?²⁹⁷

During his short presentation, which occurred first, Scott covered many historical facts about religion and religious contrarianism from Ancient Mesopotamia to the Enlightenment.²⁹⁸

As with the previous debate the atmosphere was collegial. I did not have the opportunity to collect all of the questions which were submitted to the moderator; I did, however, make a list of the questions which were selected and subsequently asked. The purpose of this list is to provide a sense of how the debate went while also highlighting what interested the apparently

²⁹⁶ Biographical sketches from the event pamphlet. The back of the pamphlet reads, in part, “We affirm the value of interfaith interaction, for educating ourselves regarding other faiths and philosophical traditions. The interfaith concept is a unifying vehicle, which can aid us in bring the reformation of the world nearer to reality. Keeping this in mind, we’d like to cordially invite you to participate in this special event and help us celebrate and bridge the differences between us to strive for a peaceful future.”

²⁹⁷ As read by Scott at said debate.

²⁹⁸ Some of his more interesting points were that: since we are all born atheists, atheism is as old as humanity; Sargon of Akkad’s birth story is reminiscent of Moses’, just as Hammurabi’s law code is reminiscent of Mosaic law; for a period Ionians were unrestrained in philosophy; atheists faced persecution from Christians; eventually the Renaissance and the Enlightenment taught “reason as a legitimate source of authority” and brought about secular states and modern science.

religiously mixed audience of approximately 100. In order of appearance, here is a chart listing the questions asked to the panelists²⁹⁹:

Table 3: Questions for all participants

Question Directed to:	Question
Scott Keith (Atheism)	What is atheisms' view about life after death? Is there any guiding roles, dogmas, or principles for the atheists? How do I know God doesn't exist?
Not Specified (All)	If there is a God how do you explain the amount of suffering that goes on in the world, such as illness, genocide, etc.?
Cantor Daniel Benlol (Judaism) and Muhammad Afzal Mirza (Islam)	[What are your views on] the Dome on the Rock?
Scott Keith (atheism)	How did nothing create everything, for example, the universe?
Muhammad Afzal Mirza (Islam)	According to the Old Testament and Christianity a sacrifice needs to be offered to God for forgiveness of sins. What does Islam teach about forgiveness of sins, and is sacrifice necessary for this according to your teachings?
Chris Hutton (Christian) and Cantor Daniel Benlol (Judaism)	What is the Christian or Jewish position on the Prophet Mohammad?
Not Specified (All)	[If] religion and prophets all come from the same God, then why are there so many differences in the religions and teachings and, on the flip side, why are there so many similarities as well?*
Muhammad Afzal Mirza (Islam)	Was the Holy prophet married or not and why are Muslims allowed to marry more than five women?
Scott Keith (Atheism)	Is spirituality a human condition? How do you define spirituality?
Not Specified (All)	Is Jesus the Son of God? If 'yes' then who is God, why was Jesus crucified, and why didn't God save him?
Not Specified (All)	Was it Jesus' intent to create a new religion or was it the people who created a new religion, Christianity?
Muhammad Afzal Mirza (Islam)	How do you define a good person, and what if you knew you had not been a good person? Is there any hope for such a person?

* Question asked on the spot by moderator (not an audience submission)

While interfaith dialogue discussions or debates on the founders of religion are not unique, it is less common for atheism to be represented than on debates focussed on the question

²⁹⁹ Recalled verbatim from an audio recording an ACUO member made of the event and shared with me at a later date.

of God's existence. Many atheists are critical and dismissive of the insinuation that atheism is a religion, let alone that it is a religion that had a founder. While Scott did not consider atheism to be a religion or a faith he did welcome the opportunity to present the history of atheism, or religious skepticism, and, as with the previous debate, it unfolded relatively smoothly and without incident.

The forum itself provided for a sense of respect between the respective faiths and atheism, in that they were willing to listen to each other's perspectives and engage with each other's opinions, even when they disagree with those opinions. As with the previous debate, the audience questions reflect serious inquires which were asked and responded to respectfully. People seemed genuinely curious about the opinions of those with different worldviews, and including atheism in the debate demonstrates a willingness on behalf of the organizers to provide space for a diverse array of views in a hostility-free environment. The invite and the questions show an equality of treatment between the religious and atheist dispositions which were represented that evening, as does the willingness of the ACUO to engage in 'interfaith' dialogue.

4.2.3 The Muhammad Stick Figure 'Controversy' (2011)

On the afternoon of September 19, 2011, during a two-day event called "Club Day" (another tabling opportunity), I stopped by the ACUO table. The ACUO table was rather sparse: it had a few atheistic cut-out slogans taped to a white cloth table-covering, pamphlets, a few religious books such as *The Book of Mormon* and a book on pseudo-scientific spirituality (i.e. a how-to guide for astral projection) which were meant to showcase religious folly, but unlike most of the other tables it did not have a banner, and it seemed rather haphazardly constructed. Prominently displayed was a laptop featuring a rather crudely drawn but otherwise unassuming

or ‘child-like’ stick-man figure. Above the stick-man figure was the word “Muhammad.” Scott, who was working the table with another member, told me that it was a statement on freedom of expression. He had mentioned that one student stopped by the table and inquired about it, but he gave no suggestion that the caricature was generating any actual controversy besides the occasional inquiry, and that he hoped it would interest like-minded people who support freedom of speech to join the club. This did not seem like a radical proposition since the inability to depict Muhammad visually without repercussions had by then become a freedom of speech/expression issue, particularly with South Park having recently been censored and with the Danish Muhammad cartoon controversy still in recent memory (more on those below). The discussion then turned to their growth of membership.³⁰⁰

In covering the club tables, the student newspaper, *The Fulcrum*, picked up on the stick figure drawing which had attracted little attention at the actual event. The article, published a few days after the event, was entitled, “Atheist [sic] instigators: Muhammad makes appearance on campus.” The author of the article, Kelden Formosa, stated that “[t]he new big thing in atheist and secularist activism is to desecrate those symbols considered sacred by believers, perhaps in the hopes of sparking debate on important questions like the existence of God or the social utility of religion, or perhaps just to frustrate and anger those who do believe.”³⁰¹ Turning to the ACUO, he wrote:

At the University of Ottawa, our very own Atheist Club, formally known as the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO), has recently taken to copying such tactics. At the club fair, they displayed a stick figure image of Muhammad on a laptop (their creativity is striking).

I met with third-year student Scott Keith, the president of the ACUO, to discuss the tone of the debate surrounding the existence of God and the effects of religion on society. Over the course of our discussion, he maintained that the ACUO is a social group that is “not trying to de-convert anyone,” instead [it] focuses

³⁰⁰ I was informed that from tabling 101 Week and, so far, on Club Day, that year they had obtained 35 new signatures on their sign-up sheet.

³⁰¹ Kelden Formosa, “Atheist [sic] instigators: Muhammad makes appearance on campus,” *The Fulcrum*, <http://thefulcrum.ca/2011/10/atheist-instigators/>, October 12, 2011, accessed November 6, 2011.

on the “promo[tion] of secular values.” But he sees no problem with his club’s posting of the Muhammad stick figure, saying that even though it is inflammatory [sic] and that most Muslims on campus would likely take offence to the drawing, it is not illegal.³⁰²

Formosa then explained that “just because it is legal to offend people doesn’t mean it’s right, or constructive, to do so,” and that “[u]niversities should be among the best venues for discussing the soundness and social utility of religious belief.”³⁰³ He concluded that:

If it is to be of any value, dialogue on religious issues must be respectful. While nobody can force others to act respectfully, we can and should speak up when they are acting with an insensitivity that demeans belief and offends believers. [...] We cannot allow the shrillest and most offensive voices to drown out a reasoned and respectful discussion.³⁰⁴

On the date *The Fulcrum* article was first published, Scott explained to the club via Facebook that: “Muhammad was a stick figure to highlight the fact that even non-derogatory depictions of Muhammad cause offense to Muslims, which is completely illogical.” Members of the ACUO did not appreciate the tone of the *Fulcrum* article, and many saw it as an attack on the club. This is reflected in the comments section under the online version of the article.³⁰⁵ There seemed to be agreement from those discussing the topic on the Facebook page that the article needed to be rebutted, but the question was how. Some members were concerned with tone, wishing to show that the club is inclusive, while others argued for a blunt or polemical rebuttal. No members wrote anything that can be considered a criticism of the initial drawing of the stick figure itself. This is likely because free speech and blasphemy had been in the news as an issue for quite some time, and some members were genuinely concerned about the censorship of religious criticism.

³⁰² Formosa.

³⁰³ Ibid.

³⁰⁴ Ibid.

³⁰⁵ In fact, the article spawned a short but noteworthy debate in the comment section; *Fulcrum* Executive Director Jaclyn Lytle commented: “Wow, I never expected this article to create so much dialogue so quickly.” Ibid. See comments.

Following the initial article and the flurry of comments it received, Scott was asked by *Fulcrum* Executive Director Lytle to respond with a letter to the editor; an offer that he accepted. His letter was published in the October 20-November 2 2011 print edition of *The Fulcrum*. The letter, entitled “In defense of U of O atheists,” reads, in part:

IN MY INTERVIEW with Kelden Formosa, author of “Atheist Instigators” in last week’s edition of the *Fulcrum*, I explained why I believed portraying the prophet Muhammad was legitimate. Freedom of speech doesn’t just involve one’s right to speak their mind; it also involves one’s right to be exposed to the opinions of others. The moment one wishes to constrain the free expression of other people, either by implying that it may be in bad taste or by enforcing blasphemy laws (which still exist in Canada), they are doing a disservice to themselves.

If depictions of Muhammad offend certain Muslims, then it should serve as a motivation for those Muslims to re-establish why they feel offence in the first place. If, after careful contemplation, they truly believe stick figures labelled “Muhammad” are sacrilegious then it should reaffirm their beliefs about what is sacred to their faith. If not then perhaps they will cease to consider such depictions offensive like MSA [Muslim Student Association – see footnote 302] President Adam Gilani. Either way it will make them think; I don’t see how that could possibly be a negative thing.³⁰⁶

Scott also added that “[f]reedom of speech is a secular value that should be cherished by everyone,” and explained that “[t]he drawing of Muhammad worked to attract like-minded students to our club, and to express the secular values we believe in.”³⁰⁷

James Allan Cheyne and Fred W. Britton, who conducted an international survey with nontheists, found that, “[a]lthough atheists score somewhat more liberal than other nontheists on most measures, they differ particularly on what we have called naturalistic liberalism and, not surprisingly, on concerns about the effects of religious extremism on freedom of expression.”³⁰⁸

The results of their survey showed that atheists were even more concerned with the issue of freedom of expression than nonreligious participants in general. This deep interest in the right to free expression is certainly a factor in why one or two of the members tabling that afternoon thought it would be appropriate to depict Muhammad as they did on a laptop. From meetings

³⁰⁶ Scott Keith, “In defense of U of O atheists,” *The Fulcrum*, Letters, print edition, October 20-November 2 2011.

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ James Allan Cheyne and Fred W. Britton, *Beyond Disbelief: A Study of Some “Nones”: Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, Freethinkers, and Sceptics: A Preliminary Report*, 5. For more on their study see section 5.5.

and in-person conversations with group members I was well aware prior to the clubs drawing of the Muhammad stick figure that the silencing of expression due to offending some Muslims was a concern of some members. I mention Muslims specifically, as the concern was focused on the inability to draw Muhammad, and by extension the threat to free speech that religious doctrine can impose, whereas there did not seem to be a similar concern with creeping censorship stemming from other religions, such as Christianity. Here the ACUO is not alone. On May 20, 2010, in response to the 2005 Muslim Cartoon Controversy and the April 2010 South Park Muhammad censorship (episode 201), American cartoonist Molly Norris proposed the idea of a May 20 “Everybody Draw Muhammad Day” as a protest against censorship, and the support she received (“[t]he Facebook group attracted over 100,000 fans”) garnered mainstream media attention, to the point where Norris is now in hiding due to a fatwa issued by Muslim cleric and prominent al-Qaeda member Anwar al-Awlaki.³⁰⁹ Also of concern to some members was the United Nations adaptation of non-binding resolutions against the defamation of religion, which were brought forth by the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The resolutions, and subsequent debate (i.e. media coverage), occurred prior to and during 2010 and 2011 – when the ACUO was formed and when the Muhammad stick figure was drawn. From the perspective of many atheists, this resolution, if adopted (which it ultimately was not) would have placed atheists in danger of persecution. Likewise, while the Muhammad Cartoon Controversy was six years old in 2011, the South Park incident acted as a reminder to some atheists that criticism of Muhammad (and by extension questioning Islam), while ostensibly free to execute under freedom of speech or freedom of expression rights, had limits when it came to practical (i.e. public) application. This is not to excuse or justify the ACUO’s depiction of Muhammad as a

³⁰⁹ “Everybody Draw Mohammed Day,” <http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/events/everybody-draw-mohammed-day>, *Know Your Meme*, accessed May 20, 2014.

stick figure while tabling for recruits in September 2011, but it is, however, to offer a reason, a likely rationale, for why some members decided to include it on their table. The depiction certainly *could* or *may* have been offensive to Muslims on campus,³¹⁰ but to members of the ACUO the drawing was a form of protest against the censoring of religious criticism in an effort to recruit those who share those concerns rather than being an attempt to garner controversy or offend Muslims. The members tabling did not express any concern with the possibility that an average university-attending Canadian Muslim would be outraged; instead the drawing came across as a symbol of their support of free speech. Their conversational discourse on Islam was always that it was an ideology that should be challenged, like any other ideology, and although they disagreed with Islam as an ideology, I never once heard an ACUO member, some of whom counted Muslims amongst their closest friends, disparage Muslims as persons.³¹¹ In fact, when I did witness them debate Muslims at official events or informally at each other's university table they treated them as intellectual equals worthy of constructive and frank debate, and that courtesy was always reciprocated.

In terms of how the drawing acted as a protest rather than a bigoted attack, by the time of this incident the drawing of Muhammad had become symbolic of resistance to censorship. As noted above, following the Muhammad cartoon controversy many Westerners adopted the practice of drawing Muhammad and a 'holiday' was created with that as its sole focus. Writing about the initial Muhammad cartoon controversy, Vasilios N. Makrides explains two differing views on what depicting Muhammad means to audiences from different cultures:

³¹⁰ According to The Fulcrum, Adam Gilani, president of the U of O Muslim Student Association, "noted while he did not interpret the Muhammad display as a personal affront, he knew some of his membership would consider the display highly offensive." Formosa.

³¹¹ Considering the incident from other perspectives I can easily see how it could come across as a mixture of intolerant, insulting, and/or provoking. My interest here is not on how others interpret the drawing, but the debate it sparked and what the incident meant for members of the ACUO.

For many Muslims, the cartoons were an act of ridicule and sacrilege that demonstrated Western disdain and insensitivity for Islam and the cultural and religious values of others. For many in the West, by contrast, it was a matter of freedom of speech and expression, a human right for which the Western world had struggled over many centuries. The conflict therefore appeared to express the persistent differences between the West and Islam, emphasizing their alleged and notorious incompatibility. From another perspective, however, the episode was less a matter of religio-cultural incompatibility, than it was about fundamental values. One wonders, for example, if equally strong reactions would not have been elicited from the West if one of its – not necessarily religious – ‘sacred values’ had been parodied, values such as individual freedom or (gender) equality.³¹²

Although I cannot conceive of a ‘parody’ of individual freedom that would elicit a response comparable to multiple murders, and I do not subscribe to the view that the West can be generalized so as to exclude ‘moderate’ or ‘liberal’ Muslims who were not deeply offended or outraged by the cartoons, Makrides makes a strong point about how, for many Westerners the issue was viewed as an attack on their ‘values’. Scott mentioned this when he wrote, in his letter to the *Fulcrum*, “[t]he drawing of Muhammad worked to attract like-minded students to our club, and to express the secular values we believe in.” From this perspective, publically showing a drawing of Mohammad, even a rudimentary one, symbolises the protection of free speech and the freedom to criticise everything, including religious doctrine and dogma. Margit Warburg phrases it this way:

During the crisis of the Mohammad cartoons, the boundary of the secular versus the sacred was challenged in a discourse over the principles of Enlightenment and secular democracy involving multiple viewpoints. The two main camps consisted of those who adhered to a principle of absolute freedom of speech also to insult religious feelings, and those who asked for a principle paying special respect to religion.³¹³

The ACUO were clearly of the former camp.

Before *The Fulcrum* article, when one of the members asked on Facebook how the tabling went, Scott replied: “I believe we got 48 signatures in two days. Not bad.” To my knowledge no members quit as a result of the drawing, nor am I aware of any who joined simply

³¹² Vasilios N. Makrides, “Religions in Contemporary Europe in the Context of Globalization,” in Peter Beyer and Lori Beaman, *Religion, Globalization, and Culture*, (Boston: Brill, 2007), 549-569, 550.

³¹³ Margit Warburg, “Globalization, Migration and the Two Types of Religious Boundary: A European Perspective,” in Peter Beyer and Lori Beaman (Eds.), *Religion, Globalization, and Culture*, (Boston: Brill, 2007), 79-99, 93-94.

because of the drawing. If anything it helped to unify the active members of the club, many of which supported Scott through comments on social media, under the online editions of the *Fulcrum* article, and Scott's letter to the editor. The incident became a focal point which informed the clubs sense of shared identity, as did a debate involving the topic of abortion.

4.2.4 The Abortion Debate (2011)

Jesse M. Smith explains the two types of grievances organized atheists in the US commonly engage with:

Organized activism develops from a shared sense of grievance with some aspect of the broader society. There exists a shared felt need to respond to, and sometimes protest against, what is seen as unjust or untrue. To properly speak of "atheist activism" then, one must identify the set of grievances most common to groups of atheist actors. These can be distilled into two basic categories: (1) those that deal with the issue of separation of church and state and the perceived ubiquity and encroachment of religion/theism, and (2) those that deal with the marginal status of atheism itself.³¹⁴

With regard to the ACUO, although the "marginal status of atheism" may have been a factor in their early debates and later Reason Week event (see below), their decision to rally around their Vice President in a debate on abortion speaks to his first categorical grievance, that of dealing "with the issue of separation of church and state and the perceived ubiquity and encroachment of religion/theism." How grievances become actual agendas is another question, and in this case it seems chance played a major role.

In the fall of 2011, posted around campus was a call for someone to argue the pro-choice³¹⁵ side of a debate on abortion on campus. The debate was organized by the University of Ottawa Students for Life and the University of Ottawa Medical Students for Life – two pro-life groups who were looking for someone to debate Stephanie Gray, the Executive Director of the

³¹⁴ Smith, *Collective*, 93.

³¹⁵ In keeping with the spirit of this thesis, which respects self-identification, I have chosen to use the terms groups *themselves* identify with on this issue as opposed to how their opposition, or 'other', labels them, thus pro-life rather than anti-choice, and pro-choice rather than anti-life.

Canadian Centre for Bio-ethical Reform. The pro-life organizers wrote a letter to the editor in the University of Ottawa's student newspaper³¹⁶ soliciting a debater for the pro-choice side, and displayed a poster around campus that showed Stephanie Gray as representing the pro-life side and asking "Will any pro-choicer show up?" in the slot dedicated to the pro-choice side.³¹⁷

Jovan Morales,³¹⁸ who had recently been voted in as Vice President of the ACUO, saw the poster and decided to offer to debate the pro-choice side. He subsequently contacted the organizers, and he was scheduled for the debate. The topic of the debate was "Should physicians provide, or refer for, abortion." With less than a week to go, Jovan, who openly acknowledged lacking debating experience, solicited the ACUO for preparation advice.

It must be stressed that the debate itself was NOT an official club event. Jovan did, however, receive a lot of moral and ideological support from the club: in a hastily arranged meeting a few days before the event club members offered both encouragement and prepping. Many of the club members also showed their support by attending the debate.

The audience of over two hundred consisted of many pro-life sympathizers who were of an older demographic, as well as pro-choice sympathizers of a younger demographic, some of whom brought protest signs which had slogans including: "Pro-Choice is Pro-Life" "Trust Women," "An Egg is not a Chicken," "My Body/My Choice," and "I hope the fetus you 'save' is gay." Putting aside the content of the arguments themselves, Gray came across as a calm, collected professional with well-practiced oratory skills. Jovan came across as eager, genuine, and well-humoured, but understandably less experienced at debating than his opponent. Overall,

³¹⁶ See: Theresa Stephenson, 2011, "Invitation for dialogue," <http://thefulcrum.ca/2011/11/letters-3/>, Letter's, *The Fulcrum*, accessed May 20, 2014.

³¹⁷ The poster can be found at: "Abortion on the Agenda on Nov. 10 and 11," 2011, <https://ottawastudents4life.wordpress.com/2011/11/>, *University of Ottawa Students for Life*, November 7, accessed May 20, 2014.

³¹⁸ As with the case with Scott Keith (above), since Jovan conducted this debate with his real name and the title of Vice President of the ACUO, there is no sense in protecting his identity here – it is publically available (the debate is online). Jovan Morales has granted permission to use his real name for this discussion.

many of the members of the ACUO that I spoke to immediately following the debate felt that Jovan did a commendable job, although they did feel that he lost the debate due to inexperience. Jovan agrees with that assessment, and to my knowledge, none of the ACUO members' opinions on the issue being debated were swayed by the debate. Looking up reviews of the debate online it is interesting to note that pro-life commenters did not take issue with Jovan's atheism even though he was introduced as the Vice President of the ACUO and was open about his atheism during the debate,³¹⁹ nor did any pro-choice commenters.³²⁰ Overall the experience was bonding for the club and it showed an interest in public engagement.

The abortion debate, and the club's subsequent interest in the issue, later led to a few members taking it upon themselves to create and counter pro-life posters which were posted around campus with their own posters containing a pro-choice message.³²¹ Jesse M. Smith explains that, from his studies on American atheism, he found that atheists often advocate "specific sociopolitical ideas" which "become shared goals that orient and shape the collective

³¹⁹ Average reviews from the pro-life side include: "You have to say well done to Jovan Morales from the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa at least he had the courage to stand up for his convictions." ("Look Who's Not Showing Up For A Debate," 2011, <http://wewantthedebate.ca/look-whos-not-showing-up-for-a-debate/>, We Want the Debate, November 12, accessed May 23, 2014.) "Her opponent was a man of good humour. He was from the Atheist Society. And while abortion was clearly not "his thing" he gave a valiant effort where many, many would not tread." (Andrea Mrozek, 2011, "A very quick debate report," <http://www.prowomanprolife.org/2011/11/12/a-very-quick-debate-report/>, ProWomanProLife.org, November 12, accessed May 23, 2011.)

³²⁰ Some pro-choice attendees of the event posted in the comments section of the pro-life blogs, but they are few and primarily criticize the need for the debate and/or how it was organized. Average comments from the pro-choice side include: "[T]his debate was a total set-up. [N]o one from the pro-choice community in [O]ttawa was asked to participate in the debate. [W]hile it was nice that [J]ovan accepted the non-invitation, he did not have the background or experience to argue from the perspective of the pro-choice movement and ended up making some pretty oppressive and ineffectively [sic] thought-out arguments. [S]tephanie spends her entire career articulating these issues, of course she 'won'. but the pro-life side certainly didn't gain any credibility for such a poorly run event." (Patricia Maloney, 2011, "Debate: Should physicians provide, or refer for, abortion?" <http://run-with-life.blogspot.ca/2011/11/debate-should-physicians-provide-or.html>, *Run With Life*, November 12, accessed May 23, 2014, see comments). "[P]erhaps no one was willing to 'debate' you because we don't 'debate' human rights. We stand up for them." (KC McLean-D'Aout, 2011, "U of O Abortion Debate: Courage and Class and a bit of Bad Behaviour," <http://cplstudents.moonfruit.com/#/blog/4555481544/U-of-O-Abortion-Debate-Courage-and-Class-and-a-bit-of-Bad-Behaviour/411476>, CPL Students Blog, *Canadian Physicians for Life*, November 13, accessed May 23, 2014, see comments).

³²¹ Images of these posters, which about half a dozen ACUO members put up around campus, can be viewed in Appendix VI.

and organizational actions of atheists.”³²² In this case a few of the most active members of the ACUO, after rallying behind their Vice President on the issue of abortion, adopted the pro-choice message as a shared goal, and that goal oriented their organizational actions.

To my knowledge, there was only one ‘possible’ ‘open’ or ‘out’ pro-life member of the group, and in the coming months she quit, frustrated with arguing on Facebook.³²³ Although I feel it is important to note how the event unfolded in order to accurately document the ACUO, my interest in the debate is less about who won or what points were raised than it is with agenda. This turned out to be the only social, political, and moral issue toward which the ACUO devoted serious time and effort. For comparison, I had noticed that the Centre For Inquiry Ottawa branch was involved with the issue of euthanasia, supporting Dying with Dignity, and they were also engaged with LGBTQ rights, walking proudly in the local gay pride parade each year. The ACUO, on the other hand, did not make these issues a part of their agenda.

I also noticed that Jackson Doughart, a semi-frequent guest author for the *National Post*’s *Holy Post* Blog (and lately a contributor to the *Prince Arthur Herald*), who writes from an atheist perspective and was often noted to be a member of the Secular Student Alliance, considered himself pro-life, wrote pro-life articles for his home province of Prince Edward Island and engaged in at least one debate taking the pro-life position.³²⁴ Moreover, one of the four most noted ‘New Atheists’, Christopher Hitchens, has made pro-life comments, and at one point answered ‘yes’ to a question about being involved with the pro-life movement.³²⁵ This is not to

³²² Smith, *Creating*, 90.

³²³ She is autistic, and she seemed to have been disturbed by members who felt that aborting fetuses with down syndrome was a social or individual good, concerned that if a prenatal test for autism was ever invented then autistic fetuses, like the vast majority of fetuses with down syndrome, would also be aborted.

³²⁴ Interesting his debating opponent was also an atheist, University of Prince Edward Island philosophy professor Malcolm Murray, author of *The Atheist’s Primer* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2010).

³²⁵ Ben Stein asked, “Christopher Hitchens, does that mean that you are; are you involved in the pro-life movement [indecipherable]?” Hitchens answered, “Um, I believe that the concept ‘unborn child’ is a real concept, yes, um, and I’ve had a lot of quarrels with, ah, some of my fellow materialists and secularists on this point, I think that if the

argue that there is a major debate within atheist circles on this issue, nor is it to suggest that many atheists are not pro-choice. The reverse is evidently the case; two of the four most cited New Atheists, for example, have forwarded pro-choice arguments³²⁶ (the forth, Daniel Dennett, has, to my knowledge, not publicly expressed his views as such, instead problematizing the issue³²⁷), and studies show that atheists often lean to the left on social, political, and moral issues such as abortion (see Chapter 5). In other words, there are indeed pro-life atheists out there, but they make up a small percentage of atheists, so when an atheist club such as the ACUO forwards a pro-choice agenda there is little risk of alienating fellow atheists, but there is reason to believe, as Jesse M. Smith suggests, that rallying around an issue such as abortion which is perceived to be encroached by religion can aid in group solidarity. This seems to be the case here. It is also significant that the audience, judging from online comments, did not consider Jovan's atheism to

concept 'child' means anything, the concept of unborn child can be certain to mean something," claimed that scientific embryology does "appear to confirm that opinion," which he said is "instinct in anyone who's ever watched a sonogram," and finished by saying, "so, 'yes' is my answer." "Christopher Hitchens on the Pro-Life movement," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cbYCQ7w_wFs, *YouTube*, Reading the Score, August 23, 2012, accessed Aug 13, 2014.

³²⁶ In *The End of Faith*, Harris writes: "Many of us consider human fetuses in the first trimester to be more or less like rabbits; having imputed to them a range of happiness and suffering that does not grant them full status in our moral community. At present, this seems rather reasonable. Only future scientific insights could refute this intuition." Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 177. Similarly, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins argues: "Early embryos that have no nervous system most certainly do not suffer. And if late-aborted embryos with nervous systems suffer – though all suffering is deplorable – it is not because they are *human* that they suffer. There is no general reason to suppose that human embryos at any age suffer more than cow or sheep embryos at the same developmental stage. And there is every reason to suppose that all embryos, whether human or not, suffer far less than adult cows or sheep in a slaughterhouse, especially a ritual slaughterhouse where, for religious reasons, they must be fully conscious when their throats are ceremonially cut. [...] Secular moralists are more likely to ask, 'Never mind whether it is *human* (what does that even *mean* for a little cluster of cells?); at what age does any developing embryo, of any species, become capable of *suffering*?" Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 336, emphasis in original.

³²⁷ In *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*, Dennett writes: "At what 'point' does a human life begin or end? The Darwinian perspective lets us see with unmistakable clarity why there is no hope at all of *discovering* a telltale mark, a saltation in life's processes, that 'counts.' [...] Which is worse, taking 'heroic' measures to keep alive a severely deformed infant, or taking the equally 'heroic' (if unsung) step of seeing to it that such an infant dies as quickly and painlessly as possible? I do not suggest that Darwinian thinking gives us answers to such questions; I do suggest that Darwinian thinking helps us see why the traditional hope of solving these problems (finding a moral algorithm) is forlorn. We must cast off the myths that make these old-fashioned solutions seem inevitable." Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life*, (Toronto: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 1995), 513-514.

be an issue. In fact, the only question related to religion came from a member of the audience who wanted to know what Gray's religious views were. Being a Christian, it would seem, was considered relevant to the discussion of abortion while being an atheist was not.

4.2.5 Reason Week (2012)

Reason Week was a weeklong atheism outreach and awareness event that the ACUO held in the spring of 2012. The purpose of the event, according to the meetings I attended while it was still in the planning stages, was to explain “what atheists believe” (mentioned was the scientific method and that “reason is superior to faith”); debate evolution verses creationism and “morality ethics” (mentioned for the latter was that those who are religious believe in altruism and faith-based bigotry whereas atheists believe in rational self-interest and altruism); and explain “beautiful truths” (explained as “awe inspiring facts” such as “we are all made of stardust”). In this sense the purpose of Reason Week was similar to what Jesse M. Smith noticed about the American atheist organizations he studied:

Atheists collectively aim, through their organizational frameworks, to educate the public about who they are through various forms of self-advocacy and social/political activism in an attempt to acquire greater control over the social meaning of atheism – thereby creating greater consistency between their identity and the public's perception of them.³²⁸

Additionally, however, in an email sent out from the ACUO President and the newly appointed Vice President prior to Reason Week,³²⁹ it was made clear that a main purpose of hosting the event, which ran from February 14-17, 2012, was to freely discuss religion:

Our goal for [the main tabling] area is to let people discuss the taboo in our society, too often we are told never to discuss religion, so we're going to break that and encourage people to talk about their gods or lack of delusions.

³²⁸ Smith, “Creating,” 95-96.

³²⁹ Email sent and received on February 5, 2012.

While the purpose was ostensibly to engage in dialogue and get their messages across to those who were curious (as well as garner more members), the signs the club displayed during the actual debate were quite polemic, and the clubs subsequent discussion of Reason Week revealed a split in atheist identities that has been identified by Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith in their research. That split concerns a difference of opinions in how they would like to present themselves.

During Reason Week the community set up tables in a central building's main foyer on campus, played videos on a stage that was within close proximity, and some members (principally those who had volunteered to table) wore stickers that read, "ATHEIST (ASK AWAY!)." The videos primarily consisted of clips of prominent atheists such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, as well as science educators such as Carl Sagan, and comedic videos which mocked religion. While some of the videos could certainly be seen as offensive or controversial, depending on one's viewpoint(s) and perspective, most of the videos which were shown were meant to advocate science, reason, and rationalism, while a few were meant just to get a laugh. The videos were played on two of the events' four days.

Sold on the tables were baked goods such as dinosaur-shaped cookies and cupcakes with messages decorated onto them. Besides the club logo, the cupcakes displayed sayings and symbols such as "Reason is Sexy", the 'Darwin Fish'³³⁰, and the word "God" crossed out within a circle ala the globally common No Smoking sign. Also on the table were pamphlets from the Secular Student Alliance,³³¹ from which the ACUO was by now independent, but with which it shared the common interest of atheism.

³³⁰ A Darwin Fish is an Ichthys (which is an ancient Greek symbol of a fish adopted by Christians), with legs drawn on it to turn it into a symbol of evolution.

³³¹ These pamphlets were entitled: "Atheism 101 by August Berkshire," "Evolution in a Nutshell," "Scientific Method and the Burden of Proof," "The Problem of Evil By August Berkshire," "Nontheistic Students In Your High

Besides handing out pamphlets, talking with passerbys, selling baked goods, and playing videos, the club also held a “de-baptism ceremony” and a charity drive that gave the donor an opportunity to “bring an atheist” to his or her church, synagogue, or mosque. The de-baptism ceremony consisted of having ones forehead subjected to a working hair drier while a confirmation of rejection was read and agreed to; the participant was then given a certificate of de-baptism with the title “The Unholy Sacrament of De-Baptism.” With only one donation made toward the charity drive (twenty dollars, collected for Doctors Without Borders³³²), the winning donor was a student adherent of a local Pentecostal Church, and a few of the members followed through with the promise to attend his church the following Sunday.³³³

As with most university clubs who have been granted the opportunity to express its concerns or beliefs, or self-promote, through tabling, the ACUO had created some signs. These signs were pasted on the walls directly behind their tables, taped on the front of their tables, and a few were places on other walls within the immediate vicinity, such as near the neighboring stage which was showcasing their videos. In no particular order, the following table lists and reproduces the signs they created on coloured Bristol boards. Numbers have been added for ease of analysis.

School: An Educator’s Guide to Atheists, Humanists and Other Nontheist Students,” and “What is an Atheist? Understanding People Who Don’t Believe in a God.”

³³² Doctors Without Borders is a secular charity which helps “people worldwide where the need is greatest, delivering emergency medical aid to people affected by conflict, epidemics, disasters or exclusion from health care.” “About Us,” <http://www.doctorswithoutborders.org/about-us>, *Doctors Without Borders*, Accessed May 15, 2014.

³³³ I and a group of four others fulfilled this promise on Sunday March 4, 2012, when we attended the Pentecostal service which included speaking in tongues, urging the audience to take hold of the microphone when they felt compelled to do so by the Holy Spirit, and an apparent irregularity for that specific community: worship, or possession, through laughter. Though it seemed that both the invitee to the church and the ACUO members were both hoping for a conversion, none happened, but the interactions were cordial and respectful.

Table 4: Signs displayed during Reason Week

<p>1. Is God willing to prevent evil but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then <u>why</u> call him God?</p> <p style="text-align: center;">– Epicurius 341-270</p>	<p>2. LET THE WOMAN LEARN IN SILENCE WITH ALL SUBJECTION BUT I SUFFER NOT A WOMAN TO TEACH, NOR TO USURP AUTHORITY OVER THE MAN, BUT TO BE IN SILENCE!</p> <p style="text-align: center;">– 1 TIMOTHY 2: 11-12 LOL U MAD FEMINISTS?</p>
<p>3. DO YOU BELIEVE IN HELL?</p>	<p>4. COME GET UNBAPTISED! Friday, February 17th @ 3:30 Sign up here!</p>
<p>5. God did <u>not</u> make man. A single creator did not make us. Our species, mankind, instead made, and continues to make, many hundreds and thousands of gods.</p> <p>The gods that we've made are exactly the gods you'd expect to be made by a species that's about half a chromosome away from being chimpanzee.</p>	<p>6. <u>DID THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD SUFFER FROM SCHIZOPHRENIA WHEN HE HEARD VOICES FROM GOD?!</u></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>share your thoughts with us*</u></p>
<p>7. WAS MOHAMMED SUFFERING FROM SCHIZOPHERNIA WHEN HE HEARD GOD? TELL US WHAT YOU THINK!</p>	<p>8. WAS MOHAMMED REALLY RECEIVING ALLAH'S WORD, OR WAS HE JUST DELUSIONAL?***</p>
<p>9. Have We Offended You? You have two options: 1) Talk to us, our goal is to encourage an open dialogue 2) STONE US! The punishment for blasphemy is DEATH and usually by the community and always gruesome. We as a club acknowledge that we are blaspheming by both of our definitions, and to allow you to practice your faith, we are submitting ourselves to the according punishment. However, we live in a free world secular country which does not tolerate murder on religious grounds, so instead you can pelt us with water balloons. And remember, let he who is without sin CAST THE FIRST BALLOON 4:00 PM / 16H @ Morisset Terrace</p>	<p>10. Send An Atheist To Church / Mosque / Synagogue</p> <p>In the spirit of hearing each other out, we would like to volunteer ourselves to attend a ritual at your place of worship. To participate, please make a donation to the religion or denomination of your choosing. Should you wish to chaperone a small group of atheists, please leave your contact information and if your faith raises the most money we will gladly and <u>respectfully attend</u>.</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><u>All proceeds go to</u> <u>Doctors Without Borders</u></p>

* This sign was stolen.

** This sign was the replacement for the stolen sign.

The signs that dealt directly with the club were signs 4, 9, and 10. Sign 4 advertised a baptism ceremony, sign 9 advertised a sarcastic water balloon stoning event (which never took place) and sign 10 advertised the “send an atheist” to your place of worship charity drive. Signs 1 and 5 address theism in general. Signs 2, 3, and 4 can be seen as criticizing Christianity, with sign 2 being a direct criticism. Signs 3, 6, 7, 8, and 9 can be seen as criticizing Islam, with signs 6, 7, and 8 being direct criticisms. Therefore, three signs dealt directly with club events; two signs address theism in general; three signs criticized Christianity (two indirectly and one directly), and five signs criticized Islam (two indirectly and three directly). Since one of the signs which were directly critical of Islam was stolen and replaced, we can consider that number to be four signs critical of Islam, with two being indirect and two being direct. Notably absent were signs specifically dealing with atheism or reason. From speaking to the ACUO members who tabled or stopped by on Reason Week, it would seem that they had only a few Christians stop by the table, either out of curiosity or to have a friendly debate, but they had quite a few Muslims stop by, either for a friendly debate, a mutually argumentative discussion, or to express that they felt offended.

Prior to Reason Week there was an event held on campus put on by the University of Ottawa Muslim Student Association (UOMSA) called Islamic Awareness Week. I did not attend, but a few of the ACUO members did of their own accord and apparently engaged in debates with members of the UOMSA. On Reason Week their roles were reversed, with members of the UOMSA stopping by the ACUO’s event to engage in debate. For the most part the debates and arguments were civil. Students on both sides of the debate appeared to simply want to get their points across on the existence of God and/or the truth claims of Islam. On the

scheduled last day of the event, however, I stopped by to find that things had become a bit chaotic.

I asked one of the members what had happened. I was informed that a Muslim student was offended by one of the signs (number 6), ran behind the table, and tore it down. Soon after that incident a security guard came over and told the ACUO that they had to remove all signs and cease playing videos because they had not previously been reviewed and approved by Protection Services.³³⁴ The ACUO members were not happy about this, considering it an affront to freedom of speech, but they nevertheless complied. There was concern that the de-baptism ceremony would also be shut down, but after communal outrage at that suggestion the ACUO President agreed to allow it to go forth. Following a brief de-baptism ceremony, which consisted of a renunciation of faith, having ones forehead symbolically ‘dried’ with a hair drier, and the presentation of a certificate of de-baptism, the members held the signs as a spontaneous protest. Unfortunately for the protesters, by this time, around five pm on a Friday afternoon, the audience for the protest was lacking; besides the occasional passer-by the audience for the protest were the protestors themselves.

In their article “None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religious Nonbelief and Nonbelonging in the United States,” Joseph O’Brian Baker and Buster Smith argue that:

Compared to other nonbelieving positions, atheism makes definitive statements about the nonexistence of God – and in doing so explicitly opposes the claims of many religious traditions by declaring their falsity. Thus, atheism distinguishes itself from other nontraditionally religious positions by being the most uniformly anti-religious.³³⁵

³³⁴ Nor were their banners (signs) or pamphlets bilingual as per policy: “banners and pamphlets must be written in both official languages of the University.” (“SFUO Club Manuel,” <http://www.sfu.ca/clubs/en/registration/manual.html#11>, *Student Federation of the University of Ottawa*, accessed June 15, 2012.)

³³⁵ Joseph O’Brian Baker and Buster Smith, 2009, “None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religious Nonbelief and Nonbelonging in the United States,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(4):719–733, 731.

During Reason Week views were presented that can fairly be defined as anti-religious, playing video clips and posting signs that were critical of both Islam and Christianity. This is not unusual, as atheism is by definition ‘not theism,’ and, as Jesse M. Smith explains, atheists, in order to self-define, often engage in conceiving theists as ‘others’:

As is the case with other kinds of identities then (e.g., racial, political, or religious identities), there exists a level of in-group/out-group thinking for atheists. Thus, although research has shown that in American culture, the public views atheists as other, in constructing their own self-concepts, atheists drew their own social boundaries, on some level conceiving of *theists* as other.³³⁶

The level or degree of conceiving theists as ‘other’ may vary, and the definition of what constitutes being anti-religion may vary,³³⁷ but the ACUO certainly did define themselves in opposition to the religious ‘others’ on campus during their Reason Week event, although it is important to note that their focus was on othering the *ideas* of theists rather than othering the theists’ humanities or personhoods. Islam was singled out, and it was singled out relatively equally to Christianity. Although both Islam and Christianity were criticized, this sense of ‘equal’ critique does not take into consideration that the relative percentage of the population is vastly more Christian than Muslim, and other minority religions were not criticized during this event. The fact that it was mostly Muslims that challenged the ACUO during this event may speak to campus Muslims being more concerned than campus Christians with their public portrayal due to their minority status, more easily offended by signs than campus Christians, more willing to engage in religious dialogue than campus Christians, more driven to convert than campus Christians, or various degrees of these factors. Atheism was promoted through pamphlets, but did not come across as being the main goal of Reason Week in practice, although it was designated as such prior to the event. This led some members of the ACUO to question

³³⁶ Smith, *Constructing*, 228-229. Emphasis in original.

³³⁷ From intolerant of religious adherents and religious expression to critical of religious doctrines/ideologies but tolerant of individuals and their right to free expression – the ACUO being closer to the latter than the former.

the purpose of the club when it comes to public events, with some members arguing that they should not hold religious criticism back, and others arguing the club should focus more on self-promotion than on attacking religious ideologies.

Cimino and Smith note a dichotomy organized atheists in the US are facing with regard to how they wish to be viewed:

This “unprecedented intrusion” of atheists coming out on a scale and in a manner heretofore unseen “as writers of their own texts and producers of their own public pronouncements” brings conflicting attitudes regarding the new atheism and the proper way to promote the secular cause to the fore. With some feeling that the new atheists are too openly hostile to religion and others feeling that a total critique of religion is long overdue, a dichotomy that not only ran through the content of Free Inquiry and, to a lesser extent, the American Atheist but was also apparent in the responses to [our] questionnaire.³³⁸

Following Reason Week this dichotomy became evident within the ACUO in terms of how they wanted to be viewed: did they want to be seen as tolerant or intolerant; aggressive or nonaggressive; as promoting atheism or as attacking religion? Did they even want to engage with the public, or would they rather just socialize amongst themselves? Reason Week brought this dichotomy to the forefront, and it did affect how individual members understood the group, who they would subsequently nominate for various positions, and how they voted.

In the first meeting following Reason Week the event was discussed. The President felt it went well, in that it facilitated engaging discussions. He also noted that it would have been improved by earlier preparation and getting approval for the posters and other visuals. Some of the highlights were discussed, such as engaging in long conversations with religious passers-by. One member mentioned that while she enjoyed the “visibility of Reason Week, she sensed that the group was a bit aggressive, due to the heavy conversations” and she would rather “see the ACUO promote itself as moral individuals who are good people.” The discussion turned to one

³³⁸ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, 2011, “The New Atheism and the Formation of the Imagined Secularist Community,” *Journal of Media and Religion*, 10:24–38, 35.

of freedom of speech, related to having the posters removed. The consensus, according to the meeting's minutes which the president and vice president later circulated, was that:

It would be good to have religious people think about what's offensive in Atheist messages. Offense cannot be avoided, though it can be minimized with more tact to be able to engage with people in a less confrontational way. [...] We are not responsible for the way that others feel, [but] they are welcome to explain why they are offended.³³⁹

The new Vice President, elected at that meeting following Reason Week, explained her conception of the club in her nomination write-up which was circulated in a group email:

I possess all the skills necessary to achieve my vision of the ACUO as a group that facilitates intellectual thought and productive debates, a group in which its members can discuss about hot topics, get to know each other and practice their lack of faith, without judgment. I would also like to see this group develop new initiatives, events and ultimately become a sustainable group that can live on within the University way after its founding members have graduated and moved on.

As an Atheist, I believe that we are free to choose our morals, our lives and our purposes/actions, with unclouded judgment. Let's share our privilege with others.³⁴⁰

Besides a movie night, a pub night, a party, and meetings which suffered from an increasingly dwindling attendance, there were no more events from the ACUO, and in the following year interest in the group faded drastically. Socializing had become the agenda over outreach or debate, and members, now friends, could socialize at will through personal communications without going through official channels.

4.3 Concluding Remarks

In his study of American atheists who are engaged in collective identity work, Jesse M. Smith mentions a few areas that are *not* comparable with the ACUO. Smith finds, for example, that several of the atheist groups he studied “promoted the recognition and celebration of secular holidays” such as Darwin Day, and “the celebration of winter solstice instead of the religious-

³³⁹ Club email sent February 19, 2012.

³⁴⁰ Club email sent February 5, 2012.

themed celebrations during the holiday season.”³⁴¹ This is similar to the findings of Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, who also found an emphasis on Darwin Day. The ACUO, however, did not celebrate Darwin Day, winter solstice, or any other holiday as a group (or, to my knowledge, on an individual level). Nor were there any “efforts to develop practices around basic life transitions [...] such as birth, marriage, and funerals.”³⁴² This may be (at least partly) due to the longevity of the club as well as the age of the members, although it nonetheless shows a stark difference between the ACUO and other nonreligious groups which have been studied. The ACUO as a whole was simply not interested in replacing holidays and life transitioning rituals. In contrast to other findings, many members mentioned that they still celebrate Christmas with their family and some even accompanied their parent/s to church. However, it is important to note that they explained that they enjoyed the holiday for its familial significance (exchanging gifts; spending time with family) and they often explained that, for them, it was not a means of spiritual or religious expression or duty.

There were, however, some strong parallels between the findings of other scholars on organized atheism and the collective work of the ACUO. M. Smith explains, for instance, that “atheists construct collective identity, in part, by the talk they engage in with one another and with the public.”³⁴³ Indeed, the ACUO constructed their collective identity, and became tighter as a focused unit, when it came to their engagement with the public. The two interfaith debates they participated in brought them together as friendly opponents of theisms in the exchange of ideas; the abortion debate brought them together in much the same vein, on one side of a contentious issue. The controversy that came from the Muhammad stick-figure drawing on a computer during Club Day also helped unify the club, this time on the issue of freedom of

³⁴¹ Smith, *Creating*, 92.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, 96.

expression as they felt attacked by the local student newspaper. They drew their unity in opposition to an ‘other’, as is evident from countering pro-life posters with their own pro-choice posters and the heated discourse they held with Muslims on Reason Week. The ‘others’ were always thought of as ideologies and truth-claims, the bearers of those ideologies were fellow students sharing space with them in the marketplace of ideas. This is an important distinction, and it is one with relevance to atheist critiques of religion in general.³⁴⁴

Interestingly, their engagement with Islam is what seems to have divided the club. Following Reason Week, some members wanted the club’s public face to be of tolerance with an emphasis on informing students about atheism, while others saw religion, especially Islam, as having the potential to be dangerous,³⁴⁵ or at least as being ill-informed, and thus worthy of demystification and critique. Others simply wanted the club to act as a social group without emphasizing public engagement. In the end it seems the latter won out, and without the drive to engage with the public on further debates or other public events such as Reason Week the club faded away.

This chapter explored the ACUO as a collective, focusing on the events they participated in and why. The next five chapters explore how the individual members came to self-identify as atheists, why they joined the ACUO, and how they perceive atheism in Canada. The interviews which inform these chapters were conducted after Reason Week, when the ACUO was more

³⁴⁴ The main point here is that from a common atheist perspective, by and large, critiquing religions, even detesting religions, is simply critiquing abstract ideas, not dehumanising physical people.

³⁴⁵ It would be misleading to not mention that members concerns over Islam’s potential to be dangerous did not occur in a vacuum. Relevant (and keeping this list Ottawa-local) to the ACUO’s understanding of Islam is that in 2008 Ottawa resident Mohammad Momin Khawaja was found guilty on terrorism charges; also in 2008, Hassan Diab, a former sociology lecturer at the University of Ottawa was arrested in connection to the bombing of a Jewish synagogue in France; in 2009 Hasibullah Sadiqi was found guilty of an ‘honour killing’ in Ottawa; between 2008 and 2010 members of the so-called ‘Toronto 18’ were convicted on terrorism charges relating to a plan to storm Parliament in Ottawa and behead the Prime Minister; and in 2010 two Ottawa-area men, Misbahuddin Ahmed and Hiva Alizade, were charged with conspiracy to knowingly facilitate a terrorist activity. While members of the ACUO were aware that only a tiny fraction of Muslims engage in terrorism related activities, some were nonetheless concerned that religion was an influencing factor in this area, and Islamic terrorism was the topic of many conversations.

social than activist and members had a chance to reflect on the activities which had taken place during their most active year. These following five chapters also include the opinions of Ottawa-area non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA). The ACUO and the NGAA interviewees had a few differences in terms of atheist identity construction, but were often quite similar.

Chapter Five: Demographics and Transitions: Losing One's Religion

I was trying to figure out Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, God, all at the same time.

– Juliana, 21, undergraduate student in Pol. Science

I think it was, I mean, and it was obviously like, a lot of chipping away at first...

– Krista, 24, undergraduate student in Communication

Writing about religiosity in the United States, Darren E. Sherkat argues that age plays a major factor in self-identification as atheist, agnostic, or theist. Sherkat explains:

Aging is a process that leads to death, and as humans age, there is increased attention to personal mortality. Impending doom will likely cause reflection on the value of supernatural compensators, and an unwavering faith in a divine being capable of delivering an afterlife could be a powerful supernatural reward – an explanation that has actual this-worldly value based on the existential certainty it generates. Given this, it can be expected that age will have a positive impact on theistic certainty, and should be negatively related to atheism.³⁴⁶

He also points out that while “[s]trength in commitment to religious beliefs appears to grow over the life course as a fairly linear function of age [...] atheism also seems to crystallize with age.”³⁴⁷ In other words, although commitment to religious beliefs increase with age, so too does commitment to irreligious beliefs, although commitment to atheism, as previously noted, may be challenged by age-related reflection on mortality and existential certainty. Sociologist of religion Reginald W. Bibby also points to age as being a main factor when it comes to self-identifying as religious or irreligious. In fact, he cautions against assuming too much about the individual permanence of being a religious none, arguing that “the ‘no religion’ self-designation

³⁴⁶ Darren E. Sherkat, 2008, “Beyond Belief: Atheism, Agnosticism, and Theistic Certainty In The United States,” *Sociological Spectrum*, 28: 438–459, 441.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 455.

is often fairly temporary.”³⁴⁸ Bibby’s research, based on Canadian national survey data collected since 1975³⁴⁹, has found that religious nones:

are disproportionately young and, as they marry and have children, large numbers turn to the religious groups of their parents and grandparents for “rites of passage.” In the process, many “re-acquire” the Catholic and Protestant identities of their parents. In addition, marriages involving Nones and others tend to result in children more frequently than not being raised “something” rather than “nothing.” In short, people who take up residence in the “Religious None” category often have relatively short stays.³⁵⁰

Bibby points to age as one of the key variables that makes the ‘no religion’ category an often transitory one, arguing that as people age and experience “critical life passages,” start questioning “life’s ‘big’ ultimate questions,” and become parents, many turn toward “greater involvement, intensified belief, and increased commitment” to religion.³⁵¹

Other factors that Sherkat points to which increase the likelihood of identifying as an atheist are education (“the educated may develop greater cognitive sophistication [...] which leads to a more critical view of faith”); gender (“[w]omen choose significantly more faithful stances about god when compared to men”); race (“both African Americans and other nonwhites are more certain in their beliefs in god [...] African Americans had nearly twice the odds of favoring a more certain belief category compared to whites”); parenting (“[h]aving children also increases faith in the existence of God”); and geography (“[l]ifelong southerners and lifelong residents of rural areas have significantly higher levels of certainty in their beliefs in god”).³⁵²

In *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*, Phil Zuckerman analyses the results of 87 in-depth interviews with American apostates and highlights the nine most common reasons that came up in these interviews for why they rejected religion. None of these are exclusive, but

³⁴⁸ Reginald W. Bibby, 2002, *Nevers, Nones, and Nots: Latent Life in Unexpected Places: A Research Note By Reginald W. Bibby*, from a paper “originally presented at the annual meeting of the Pacific Sociological Association, Vancouver - April 2002,” 4.

³⁴⁹ Until 2002 for this article.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁵² Sherkat, 422, 452, 454.

each was influential in many of his interviewee's transitions from religious to irreligious: parents; education; misfortune; other cultures/other religions; friends, colleagues, lovers; politics; sex; Satan and Hell; and, malfeasance of religious associates.³⁵³ He also noted that some of his interviewees came across as "secular by nature," explaining that "some apostates may be people who have an internal predisposition toward secularity, which then blossoms or emerges in the wake of certain decisive experiences in their social lives" such as the nine common "personally secularizing catalysts" for American apostasy noted above.³⁵⁴ While Zuckerman's study deals specifically with apostates – those who left a religion – it is interesting to consider whether or not there are some atheists who were "secular by nature" and remained so without experiencing a "personally secularizing catalyst."³⁵⁵ It is also worth considering Bibby's claim about age, and if so, is the notion that atheism is a transitional phase as applicable to today's young atheists as it was to atheists at the turn of the last century.

This chapter surveys the demography of the twenty members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) and the twenty Ottawa-area non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA) I interviewed. It then examines the process by which the interviewees came to self-identify as atheists. It does so through four short biographies from four representative members of each group of interviewees (ACUO followed by the NGAA), which feature their opinions on how they came to self-identify as atheists. The chapter concludes with an analysis of the

³⁵³ Zuckerman, *Faith*, 153-163.

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

³⁵⁵ In a conversation with Jacques Berlinerblau, Phil Zuckerman elaborates on what he means by the term 'secular': "To me, *secular* simply means *nonreligious*. So, whatever religion is, to be secular would be *not that*. *Secularity* is merely the state of being secular, similar to *secularness*. It doesn't necessarily mean you're ideological about it. It doesn't even mean you're very self aware of it." It is in this sense that I am also using the term 'secular' when describing certain interviewees. See Phil Zuckerman and Jacques Berlinerblau, "Secular America: Nones, Atheists, and the Unaffiliated: A Conversation between Phil Zuckerman and Jacques Berlinerblau" in Jacques Berlinerblau, Sarah Fainberg, Aurora Nou, *Rethinking Church-State Relations in the United States, France, and Israel*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 51-70. Quote above from pages 56-57.

demography and ‘catalysts’ which led to the interviewees identifying as atheists, compared with other research findings in this area, including those reported by Sherkat, Bibby, and Zuckerman.

5.1 Demography: ACUO

Since the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) was a university group, its primary membership was young adults who attended the university. There were, however, a few older and/or non-university attending members who were part of the online Facebook community, and one of the members (Colin; see section 9.1.2 for his biography) who actively attended events and who I interviewed was not a university student but was friends with some of the other members who were. I interviewed members who were the most ‘active’, which I define as those who frequently attended, organized and/or participated in club events such as scheduled meetings, pub nights, Reason Week, tabling the university’s orientation week, and debates. They ranged in age from 18 to 30, with 22.85 being the average. Thirteen interviewees were between 18-23 years of age; the remaining seven were between 24-30 years old. Most of the interviewees grew up in various parts of Ontario, although there are exceptions, such as Belinda who moved to Ottawa from Alberta, and Tonya who was raised on the East Coast.

Of the twenty members I interviewed, sixteen had Christian backgrounds or influence of one form or another (eight primarily Catholic, five primarily a form/denomination of Protestant Christianity, and three both Catholic and Protestant), while four were raised secular, that is, without religion being a significant – or even existent – part of their familial upbringing. Interestingly, four interviewees have distinct backgrounds which include a period of identifying or experimenting with Norse mythology and/or paganism. This was a surprising finding;

considering the diversity of the University of Ottawa student body I had expected to find a more religiously diverse background amongst the members.

Thought was not initially given to equal representation, but my sample turned out to nevertheless be a relatively accurate reflection of the club, with thirteen being male and seven being female. Thirteen of the students were in Arts/Humanities (three of which, interestingly, were in the International Development and Globalization program; since these interviewees know each other, the *specific* program they are in has been changed along with their names and other identifiable features to protect their privacy), and six were science students (as noted above, one was not a student). Seventeen were undergraduate students and two were graduate students. On the next page is a table featuring the names (pseudonyms), ages, religious backgrounds, and transitional periods of doubt of those I interviewed, followed by the demographic makeup of the NGAA interviewees.

Table 5: Demography (ACUO)

Name	Sex	Age	Academic Program or Job	Religious Background (Raised)*	Period of Doubt (Initial transition from believer to non-believer)*
Glen	M	18	Undergraduate – Science	Dad Secular Roman Catholic/Mom Tight-lipped about religion	Religion came up in a grade 4 or 5 class and he thought it was a way to control people
James	M	19	Undergraduate – Arts	[An ethnic] Orthodox Christianity	Between 16-17 years of age he became a skeptic and then became agnostic
Evelyn	F	19	Undergraduate – Arts	Catholic	Upon attending university she became a “non-believer” due in part to: disagreement with a priest’s sermon against feminism; influence of friends and acquaintances
Dan	M	20	Undergraduate – Science	Catholic	Realized in grade 11 or 12 that people really believed in their religion, which he did not
Sylvia	F	20	Undergraduate – Science	Baptist	Doubted Santa Claus at 8 years of age and equated the lie with God. Pastafarian at 13-14, then atheist
Wade	M	20	Undergraduate – Science	Catholic; identified as Pagan in High School	Doubted Christianity by 8 th grade; he abandoned paganism at university
Donovan	M	20	Undergraduate – Arts	Catholic	Experimented with Norse mythology; then influenced by atheist friend in high school
Andrew	M	21	Undergraduate – Arts	Some family Catholic and Presbyterian influence	Believed in God until 14 or 15 years of age; he became atheist after reading Richard Dawkins’ <i>The God Delusion</i>
Matthew	M	21	Undergraduate – Arts	No religious background (raised secular)	Identified as an atheist after watching Richard Dawkins’ <i>The Root of All Evil</i> (early high school)
Belinda	F	22	Undergraduate – Arts	Secular	Believed in God as a child; agnostic in Jr. High; she identified as an atheist shortly after reading <i>The God Delusion</i> in High School
Heather	F	22	Graduate – Arts	Culturally Catholic	Never really believed; she identified as atheist at 16-17 years of age
Billy	M	23	Undergraduate – Science	Secular; United Church on holidays	Identified openly as an atheist when he started university
Krista	F	24	Undergraduate – Arts	Devoutly Protestant	Family drama in late teens coincided with questioning her faith
Tonya	F	25	Undergraduate – Arts	Catholic but explored Baptist youth group and Wesleyan Church	Faith challenged through dramatic incidents; following two major health issues in her early 20’s she identified as atheist
Colin	M	26	Job: Sales	Secular	At 17 years of age argued with a roommate about religion; dabbled with Norse Mythology and Satanism; atheist at 22 or 23 years of age after he took an interest in science
Brendon	M	26	Undergraduate – Science	Secular	In a grade 12 class on the existence of God he realized that he was an atheist
Alison	F	26	Undergraduate – Arts**	[An ethnic] Orthodox Christianity and French Catholicism	Stopped believing in God at 9 years of age (grade 3) after unfulfilled prayers
Gerard	M	26	Undergraduate – Arts student (during club years)**	Anglican	Doubt co-incident with an experimental social life in grade 9
Mike	M	28	Undergraduate – Arts	Catholic	After he learned about Santa Claus around grades 1-3 he equated the lie with God within two years; experimented with Norse paganism after high school but rejected it
Edward	M	30	Graduate – Arts	Atheist with Catholic Roots	Has identified as an atheist since he was 8 or 9 years of age

*My vocabulary unless in quotation marks. ** Had graduated by the time of the interview.

5.2 Demography: NGAA

The ages of the NGAA interviewees ranged from 21 to 52, with 29.6 being the average. Fourteen were in their twenties, three were in their thirties, two were in their forties, and one was in his fifties. Of these twenty individuals twelve had strictly Christian backgrounds or influence of one form or another (seven strictly Catholic, four strictly a form of Protestant Christianity, and one both Catholic and Protestant). Two were raised secular (without religion being a part of their upbringing), and three were raised with a mixture of both Christian and secular influences. One was raised culturally Jewish, another was raised with Buddhist and Catholic influences, and one grew up with Buddhist, Confucian, and Catholic influences.

As with the ACUO sample, this batch of interviewees also consists of thirteen males and seven females. Nine of the interviewees were university students, with seven being in Arts and two being in Science. Four worked for the Government of Canada (one of these public servants was also an Arts student) and the remaining six had miscellaneous jobs (one individual was also an Arts student). On the next page is a table featuring the names (pseudonyms), ages, religious backgrounds, and transitional periods of doubt of those I interviewed, followed by the next section which uses examples to explain how individuals from both the ACUO and the NGAA came to identify as atheists.

Table 6: Demography (NGAA)

Name	Sex	Age	Academic Program or Job	Religious Background (Raised)*	Period of Doubt (Initial transition from believer to non-believer)*
Juliana	F	21	Undergrad – Arts	Secular	Doubted God's existence after equating him with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy at about age 9
Tracy	F	21	Undergrad – Arts (recently graduated)	Catholic	Began questioning religion while attending university
Elissa	F	21	Undergrad – Science	Buddhist and Catholic influences	Never believed; she “was just never really into religion”
Derrick	M	22	Undergrad – Arts	Culturally Jewish	Brought up to be a critical thinker and never believed in God; identified as an atheist as his interest in politics grew and he read Dawkins
April	F	22	Undergrad – Arts	Catholic	Started to doubt in high school; at age 17, following her mother's suicide, she “firmly became an atheist”
Hanna	F	23	Undergrad – Arts	Unitarian Church; “spiritual”	Ceased going to church by the time she was 14; identified as spiritual for a period, atheist during university
Ken	M	24	Small Business Owner	Catholic	Started to doubt God's existence “once [he] left for university;” after he made some atheist friends he began openly identifying as an atheist
Ian	M	26	Graduate – Science	Culturally Catholic	Stopped believing in God in grade 4 after “plenty of reading and searching and asking questions;” identified as atheist at 21
Ashley	F	26	Writer	Catholic	Although she thinks she was an atheist “for a lot longer than that,” she came to identify as such following discussions with her atheist boyfriend when 23
Warren	M	27	Executive Director of a Firm	His family “jumped around” (Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, Mormon)	At 10 he told his parents he did not want to go to church. At least partially influenced when his parents “weren't believing any kind of religious disposition,” he felt that religion was not a “hard fast rule”
Cody	M	28	Public Servant; part-time Undergraduate – Arts	United Church	Considered himself a non-believer in junior high; identified as an atheist in college after reading Dawkins and Hitchens
Jean	M	29	Public Servant	Catholic	He never believed in God because he “never really understood what it was, this whole thing that was being taught to [him] in church”
Kevin	M	29	Graduate – Arts	Secular; United Church of his own accord	Increasingly skeptical in high school following a friend questioning his religious beliefs
Natalie	F	29	Graduate – Arts	Catholic and secular (atheist) influences	Started to doubt Catholicism by grade 8; identified as an atheist in university, solidified by reading Hitchens
Darryl	M	30	Software Engineer	Secular	He does not think he ever “went through a period of true belief” nor did he “experience the loss of faith”
Hayden	M	33	Public Servant	Culturally Buddhist with a mix of Confusion and Catholic influences	Religion was not “practiced or forced” on him growing up; he identified as an atheist following the events of 9/11
Patrick	M	38	Public Servant	Catholic	Began questioning as a teenager; after reading <i>The God Delusion</i> as an adult he identified as an atheist
George	M	42	Business Owner and Hotel Employee	Secular; attended Catholic school and camps	In grade 1 he saw his father preparing Santa Claus gifts on Christmas Eve, equated the lie with God, and identified as atheist by grade 3
Nick	M	49	Business Owner and part time Arts student	Devout Christian mother/ nominally United Church	Between the ages of 8-10 started to disbelieve, influenced by the more he read and an interest in science
Brian	M	52	Self Employed Consultant	Non-practicing Anglican	He “never really did believe in God,” openly reject belief in God around grades 6-7

*My vocabulary unless in quotation marks.

5.3 Becoming an Atheist: ACUO

There is a saying attributed to Baron d’Holbach and rephrased by George H. Smith that claims that we are all born atheists and we subsequently learn to become theists. But how do theists become atheists? Certainly every story is unique, but my data reveals that there are some patterns. For most people, becoming an atheist is a process, rather than a sudden ‘moment of conversion’. This section looks at the process by which members of the ACUO came to self-identify as atheists. It does so by a reflection of the relevant life experiences of four representative members: James, Sylvia, Wade, and Krista.

5.3.1 James

James is a 19 year-old second-year sociology student at the University of Ottawa. He is a Canadian of South Asian ethnicity who grew up in and around Toronto. Most of James’s family is religious; his parents and younger sister are church-going members of an ethnic Christian Orthodox Church. Prior to immigrating to Canada, in South Asia his parents were members of that Orthodox church, but after moving to Canada the family converted to Mormonism: “they moved here and they were like, ‘yeah we’re new settled immigrants here, what do we do?’ and then the Mormons come up to my dad and they’re like, ‘hey, join our church’ and he’s like, ‘okay, cool,’ and then I got baptized as a Mormon.” They converted back to Orthodoxy a few years later. His aunt is a Jehovah’s Witness and his family counts a bishop amongst their close friends.

James attended Catholic high school, and describes himself as having been a “really fundamentalist Christian” between the ages of 12 and 14, during which time he was also an altar server. He started to doubt his religion as a teenager and identified as an atheist in his late teens.

He heard about the ACUO through a friend who is also an atheist. He joined because he liked the idea of meeting people who were open to talking and joking about religion. Over the last two years he has been a frequent attendee of club meetings and events, including taking on table duties during Reason Week.³⁵⁶

Regarding the period where he started to doubt his faith, at about ages 16/17, James explains:

It started as sort of a rebellious thing at first, like, you know, when you start becoming a teenager and like, “yeah, screw their shit I don’t want to do all that.” And then I’m like, “hmmm, I want to become a Buddhist or something,” and I start researching Buddhism and eventually I’m like, “I don’t know, this doesn’t make sense either,” and, like, I kept on questioning things for a year, and I’m like, “hmmm, what do I believe in?” And then eventually I’m like, “you know what? This is all just BS; I don’t want any of it.” So I just rejected that completely and started becoming sceptical. [...] I just started thinking, I was just like, it’s all these ideas of like a deity and um, an omnipotent sort of power of imposed... that’s why people are conditioned to think that there has to be that; but it doesn’t necessarily have to be that way. People really don’t know anything about that, so, um, I just realized ‘I don’t know so as of now I don’t believe,’ and I’d say that’s the best way to go about it.

When asked if identifying with atheism has in any way changed or shifted his political, moral, or social policy views, James responded: “I feel like even as a Christian I was sort of more left-wing, but um, as I transitioned into an atheist I became even more left-wing, sort of like further left then centre than I was before.”

James’ story, while unique to him, shares some similarities with the experience of many other interviewees. Two things are particularly noteworthy. First, James’ transition from religious believer to nonbeliever was not something that occurred overnight; it was a process. Second, James claims he was already left-of-centre on social issues while identifying as a Christian, before he came to identify as an atheist.

One of my original hypothesis with regard to atheism and social issues was that when one began to identify as an atheist one would have to reflect upon and re-examine how he or she felt

³⁵⁶ This biography (from “James is a 19 year-old” to “during Reason Week”) was originally published in Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 117-136, 124.

about issues such as gay marriage, abortion, and euthanasia – classic social issues that are considered ‘politically charged’. Instead, as with James’ example, I found that most interviewees gave the impression that they identified to the left of these issues prior to identifying as an atheist. In fact, some made comments that spoke to just that, such as Evelyn (see section 6.1.3 for her biography) who, in response to the question “has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views at all?” said, “I think it is the other way around where my beliefs – my social, political beliefs – changed my religious beliefs.” This means that it is not simply a case of becoming an atheist and then re-examining social issues; it instead points to identifying to the left of social issues before identifying as an atheist.

5.3.2 Sylvia

Sylvia is a 20 year-old third-year undergraduate student studying physics. Before coming to the University of Ottawa she lived in northern Ontario, where most of her immediate family still resides.

Sylvia’s mother is a devout fundamentalist Baptist and her father is an atheist. Her sister is a Baptist, but her brother and most of her extended family are atheists. Sylvia went to a Baptist church every Sunday until she was 12, with the exception of the occasional time when she was able to spend her Sundays flying or fishing with her father, or working on her grandparents’ farm. Through the church she attended a weekly youth group and an annual summer Bible Camp. She claims to have been skeptical of the beliefs of her church at an early age, and after arguing over the matter with her mother, stopped going to church once she turned 12. She was critical of the way science was being portrayed in her church youth group; she had learned a few

things about the subject from her physicist uncle and was peeved at the unscientific way the Big Bang was explained and dismissed by a youth group facilitator.

Through her older brother she discovered Pastafarianism and identified with that sarcastic parody religion before coming to identify as an atheist. Sylvia joined the ACUO in order to meet new people with whom she could “discuss ideas freely” without religious beliefs being factored into the conversations. She has been a member of the group for two years and has often engaged in club meetings and events, including Reason Week and Sexy Heathen pub nights.³⁵⁷

After explaining during our interview that her mother is “a devout fundamentalist Baptist,” her sister is also a Baptist, her dad and brother are atheists, and that most of her “extended family are atheists,” Sylvia spoke about an early point in her life, during a church youth group for “the younger kids” at which she recalled questioning her church:

I’ve always been very into science, and I have an uncle who’s a physicist and after visiting him at one point, at one of the youth groups – this is when I was about five or six so it wasn’t when I had to go regularly – but I remember they took a plastic bag and they put some hard plastic toy animals in it, and paper clips, and some rubber bands, and some other random stuff; so they put all of this stuff into this plastic bag, shake it up, throw the contents onto the ground [Laughter] and say, “See; everything is the exact same as when you put it into the bag, so the Big Bang didn’t happen, and God created everything, there’s your proof.” I’m sitting there, and... [look of being perplexed/dismissive]

She explained that she identified as Pastafarian before identifying as an atheist, in part because she wasn’t familiar with the word ‘atheist’, but when she was about 11 years-old her brother gave her the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* and she thought it was “great”:

I knew that people apparently didn’t believe in God ‘cause they’d say, “Oh,” well; not even that, actually. I knew that people believed in other gods, but at that point I remember sitting in the church thinking that, “Well, there have to be other people who don’t believe in any of this crap.” Actually it took me a while to realize that everyone actually did believe in what they were talking about. At first I was thinking, “Oh, you guys actually literally believe there’s an invisible sky man up there who can do all of this. Oh. That’s weird.” Once I realized that, so, maybe I was 7; I have no idea...

But you were young though.

³⁵⁷ This biography (from “Sylvia is a 20 year-old” to “Sexy Heathen pub nights”) was originally published in Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 117-136, 129-130.

I was young and I realized, “Okay, you guys believe all of this; this is awkward.” And then after a while I realized that ‘there had to be other people who didn’t believe all of it’. I was sure I wasn’t the only one, but I still hadn’t heard of the word, ‘atheist’

[...]

How did you find out about Pastafarianism?

My brother.

Yeah?

Yep. Um, we used to go for... we’d hang out the odd time; he’s eight year older, seven or eight years older than me, and once I hit around 11 we started spending a little more time together because, well, I was really the only person in our immediate family he gets along with... [...and] because I was complaining to him about having to go to church [...] he gave me this *Gospel of the FSM* that he got. Started reading and thought, “this is great.” [Laughter]

Sylvia explained that her interest in Pastafarianism occurred when she was 13 or 14 years old, and it was through this sarcastic or spoof religion that she realized: “oh, atheist, that’s what I am. All right.”

In Sylvia’s case she transitioned from a weekly church goer who also participated in – or at least attended – extracurricular church activities (Bible camp; youth group) into someone who self-identifies as an atheist. Although she stopped believing in God at a young age; her transition was a process: interested in science and a critical thinker, as a youth she was skeptical of the claims of her church, at 12 years of age she ceased going to church, and she identified as a Pastafarian for a period before adopting the label ‘atheist’ in high school.

It is worth noting that like Sylvia, other interviewees also expressed having a moment or a period of ‘realizing’ that others “actually did believe” in their respective religions: it would seem this realization came as a bit of a surprise to Sylvia, as it did for the other interviewees who experienced a similar moment. During his interview, Dan (9.1.3), for example, explained that he took an interest in learning about religion after he “figured out that people actually believed” in their respective faiths, and Billy (6.1.4) explained that when he was younger he “knew that there were people who were religious but [he] didn’t really know what that meant, like; ...how severe of a state it could be.”

5.3.3 Wade

Wade is a 20 year-old undergraduate studying Engineering. He is originally from a Northern Ontario city but moved to Ottawa a few years ago, at the tail end of high school. Wade's dad was a Protestant Christian, then he became an atheist, and is now "a devout Buddhist." His mother is Roman Catholic. As a child Wade was homeschooled because his parents were committed to teaching him to think independently. He started attending a Catholic school in grade eight, and was "confirmed Catholic mostly so that the teachers would leave me alone and I would have access to more scholarships," but he explains that by then he had already "lost" his religion, in part at least because he had "better things to think about, like video games and boobs." He did not identify as an atheist, nor did he identify as a believing Christian. In high school he became a pagan after spending time with some pagan friends:

I used to be a pagan before I was an atheist because even that made a whole lot more sense, like the whole idea of, "well there's energy running everywhere" was a whole lot closer to science than sky daddy and, though yes, I would make a prayer to Thor or Odin, I didn't *actually* believe there was a Thor or Odin you know, I was a pagan out of practice and philosophy. And then I realized, "well, I don't need all the trinkets and stuff to go with it," so, like bringing up all that stuff and when... I found there was a lot more shit given to me being a pagan then there was being an atheist because, you know, an atheist in Canada is harmless but everybody can agree that a pagan is a Satanist, [...] which is odd because in the States I think like it's the opposite way around: there's huge, *huge* pagan communities but atheists are the godless minions of Satan.

He eventually ceased identifying as a pagan after he realized that the "special goosebump moments of enlightenment" that paganism gave him "were just me giving myself goosebumps."

His abandonment of paganism coincided with identifying as an atheist; he recalls the moment he adopted the label:

I always felt I was an atheist before I knew what it was called, everything felt right, but the only time that I thought that, like, "A-ha! I'm an atheist!" I was sitting down and I was doing tarot card reading for myself and I'm like, "What the fuck does a deck of cards have to say about my life? Fuck this, it's over it's over." Which is weird, that it's not any one religion but, like, tarot readings that made me sit down and say like, "Yeah, yeah, atheism – it's a good way to go."

Around the same time, while attending university, he recalls having "a long long long long long long long long long discussion about karma" with a member of the ACUO, in which he explained

that, to him, karma was “just a mindset that keeps yourself in check not this all-powerful multiple life-spanning thing,” and that he did not “actually believe in reincarnation.” This friend invited him to visit the ACUO and he subsequently joined.

Wade’s religious background is atypical compared to most interviewee’s in that it included paganism, although, interestingly, three other members of the ACUO also identified with (or at least experimented with) paganism of a Norse variety before identifying as atheist (Donovan, 9.1.4; Colin, 9.1.2; and Mike, 8.1.1). For Wade, identifying as an atheist did not mean rejecting an Abrahamic faith – he had already rejected a monotheistic concept of God – it meant rejecting paganism. This seems to have occurred as he entered university, became friends with atheists, and questioned the usefulness of pagan practices, such as performing tarot card readings.

5.3.4 Krista

Krista was raised in a Southern Ontario city but has lived in Ottawa for five or six years. She is 24 years-old and recently completed her Bachelor of Arts in Communication. Krista has a “very Christian background,” having been raised as a devout Protestant in a devout family. She identified strongly as a Christian and even went on a missionary trip, but when she was in her late teens, attending university, she had some family drama that came to her as a shock: her mother announced that she was in a same-sex relationship and divorced her father. This drama raised questions of divorce, adultery, and homosexuality at a time when she was already starting to question her beliefs: “[I]t definitely raised questions because I had obviously thought about these things, but I was able to push away my questions or just justify things, um, but I guess it was around that time that I was starting to question things a little bit more.” Her boyfriend at the

time was an atheist, a member of the ACUO, and when, following a brief period of feeling angry at her mother for breaking up her family, she spoke in person with her mother and her partner, her “Moms” as she now affectionately calls them, and learned that they were both atheists. That her mother no longer believed in God was a surprise to Krista, and contributed to her questioning of religion.

While attending university Krista still diligently went to church, although she found her new church, which was Pentecostal, to be uncomfortable, particularly when the congregation would speak in tongues, which she tried but her performance felt “forced.” She started missing church here and there until she eventually just stopped going. A day or two after watching the movie *Religulous* (Bill Maher and Larry Charles, Lionsgate, 2008), which left her seriously questioning whether or not there is a God, she suddenly came to the realization that her prayers had been for her contemplation only – that there was no God to hear them – and she cried for a long time. She did not immediately self-identify with the term ‘atheist’, but a few months later she grew to appreciate it and use it as a self-descriptor. Today she is open about her atheism, even with her father, although he “doesn’t like to talk about it with me because it makes him so sad.” She heard of the ACUO through her boyfriend at the time, and met other members through him, and although she now counts quite a few atheists amongst her friends she still has Christian friends, even though there are fewer of them, since “a lot of them were from church and that’s how I stayed in touch with them.”

When asked if she remembered the moment she first described herself as an atheist Krista replied in reference to when she first stopped believing in God:

I think it was, I mean, and it was obviously like, a lot of chipping away at first, but the moment that I kind of realized it I guess, ‘cause it was like, you watch a lot of things, you listen to a lot of things, um, one of the things that really got to me, kind of was, a, well, there were two things I guess, um, that were kind of ‘final straws’. The straw that broke the camel’s back. The straw was probably watching *Religulous*. Not that I think that that was the thing that turned me but it was definitely, it was, like, when I finally kind of realized

it was like... and the seed was there... and I think then maybe it was the next day or that night kinda; it was like in my head, I was like, "I don't know if I believe in God," and I remember, like maybe the day after that or something, I was coming home from the grocery store – Oh! This is the moment actually, so. I was coming back from the grocery store, I had groceries and I was so used to – all the time if I was walking somewhere like again I heard it, I was like, sitting there, I would pray because it's like 'God is right there you can always talk to Him' – um. And then I remember I did that, and then I came to this realization that.... have you ever seen *A Beautiful Mind*?

Yeah; with Russell Crowe?

Yeah, with Russell Crowe. He was just sitting there and at the end of the movie when he is ignored, I don't remember, I think he stopped taking his medication but he sees the third people that have been his delusions or whatever, he sees them and they are like, why don't you talk to us anymore? We miss you, and he sees them but he knows that they are not real, um, he knows like I want to talk to them but they're just me, like, it's my own thoughts, they're are not actually there, and so I remember thinking like; I stopped myself in the middle, like, "Dear God, thank you for these groceries," and then, like, I stopped myself and I was like, like, "my whole life when I have been praying I've just been talking to myself. I am not talking to anybody. There is nobody there," and I just balled my eyes out.

S: What was that like?

It was – it makes me emotional now, talking about it now, which is strange 'cause I can think about it different, but yeah, like, it was such a huge loss because it was my whole life.

At this point in the interview Krista became visibly emotional with tears swelling up in her eyes.

This was only momentary, and after I asked if there was anything liberating about this loss or if it was the opposite, she continued to explain why this incident – or 'realization' – was so emotional for her:

Yah, I think it was more that, um, just like realizing, it was almost similar to when I realized that for the past ten years my mom hadn't been happy, in her marriage, and just that she hadn't been happy in general and she was always like the happiest person that I had ever known, and so she had said at one time that she was just really good at acting, like, just acting happy, and so it was similar to that, realizing or thinking the past ten years of your life at that point had not been exactly how I thought they were. Um, and so it was, like, yeah, realizing that my whole life that I had believed in Jesus and God and everything – that whole aspect of my life was not real, like it's not what I thought it was; I thought it was real.

It sounds like obviously you prayed a lot if you're doing it for your own...

It felt like a huge loss, um, in terms of that habit and like, always having somebody that I thought was there to talk to, um, but I mean, obviously then I realized that there... the more fun points, 'cause there was also a loss of all sorts of guilt for like, doing things that aren't actually bad, you know, like having sex before marriage, you know, like, it's just way more freeing. Like, I can actually get drunk and not have to worry about how that's a sin, or you know, just like swearing is actually not that bad, like it's not... you won't go to hell for it, you know, like just, yeah, so definitely that loss of guilt is way better than – well, way now – than the loss of an imaginary thing. [...But] at the time I was just like crying, crying, and crying, on my bed for like the longest I had been – the hardest I have cried in a really long time anyway, maybe the hardest I have cried up to that point.

Krista's transition from theist to atheist took place at a later stage in life than many of those I interviewed, but it was nonetheless a process which took place over a substantial amount of time. As she puts it, there was "a lot of chipping away" before she came to identify as a

nonbeliever and eventually an atheist. There were certainly some life events that guided her along that path – family drama; going away to university; a bit of travel; befriending atheists – but it was the amalgamation of these events along with her own personal contemplation that lead her away from theism. It is also worth noting that during another part of the interview Krista explained that she considers her political, moral, and social views to be “evolving,” and unlike the majority of those whom I interviewed – most of which identified as an atheist at an earlier age than Krista did – her views on homosexuality and abortion seems to have shifted left following her loss of faith, not prior to her loss of faith.

5.4 Becoming an Atheist: NGAA

As with the previous section, the main question behind this one is the process by which the atheists I interviewed came to identify as atheists. I wondered whether there would be any differences between people who were part of an organized group which was focussed on atheism (ACUO) and those who were not (NGAA). My results showed that there were *not* any significant differences. This section looks at the process by which atheists who do not belong to atheist communities that meet in person came to self-identify as atheists, and it does so through a reflection on the religious backgrounds of four representative individuals: Patrick, Ken, Juliana, and April.

5.4.1 Patrick

Patrick is a 38 year-old employee of the Government of Canada. He has lived in the Ottawa Region (Gatineau) all of his life, and presently works in Ottawa. Patrick describes most of his friends and family as atheist. He was raised Catholic but started to question his faith as a

teenager. In college he became a communist (“I wasn’t exactly an atheist, but pretty close”) and he became more conservative in his late teens/early twenties. He went through some religious searching before identifying as an atheist after reading Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*. When asked if he remembered the moment he first self-identified as an atheist Patrick explained that as a teenager:

A friend of mine said, you know, our emotions... I don’t remember the context which we were saying that our emotions are all chemical by-products in our bodies. Yes, that’s true, and at that point I thought, ‘okay, that means that is not my soul.’ That’s like the first step. It took a while for me to move away from religion and I tried to rationalize it but at some point back in my 20’s/early-30’s I knew if I ever got past my fear of death that I would be an atheist. I just knew, but I didn’t want to be, because I was afraid of death. I read *The God Delusion* and he addressed that point specifically, plus all of my other little objections.

His self-identification as an atheist occurred as an adult when he was 32/33 years old. The shifting trajectories of Patrick’s religious beliefs before that point became apparent early on in the interview:

I was Catholic. Then I kind of moved away from the church. I was in college so I became a communist. I wasn’t exactly an atheist, but pretty close. Then I turned very conservative in my late teens/early 20’s and I joined Amway. Which I would say is very religious/conservative! [...O]ne guy at one conference I went to talked about, well, he makes me Pascal’s Wager and I fell hook, line and sinker for that so I went back to the Catholic Church for a while. [...] So at some point I started reading the Bible at that point. I was reading Exodus and that, when I went, ‘okay what? Seriously?’ I didn’t believe the whole story, [...] all the bells were ringing, like flags were waving, like, ‘whoa, whoa, whoa, wait a minute.’ This is really where the point where I put [indecipherable] at that point, and then after that I was mostly agnostic. I looked, I mean I looked for other stuff: I was in Scientology, that kind of stuff, but I did look into Neopaganism a little and I was trying to jive it with... [...] It lasted a few months. [...] I was more interested in Norse paganism. Mostly because I was reading novels about Vikings so that was just cool [...] I was doing my Masters at the time so I was taking, you know, methodology courses and that kind of stuff. I was driving with one of my [indecipherable] looking at more stuff, saying – okay because I believed in ghosts at the time and that kind of stuff. And really looking at it, saying, “okay we can’t really say, nobody can really prove that there is ghosts so I might as well just say there are no ghosts until someone proves it,” kind of deal. That’s when I really started moving into, and someone lent me *The God Delusion*, and just like done. It just happened all at the same time.

Although his switch from religious seeker to atheist included many factors that “happened all at the same time,” his actual transition from religious believer to nonbeliever shares something with each and every other interviewee that was raised with a religion, in that it was a process, as Patrick alludes to when he mentions having gone through a “first step” years

before identifying as an atheist. In his case, this transition took longer than most of the interviewees, spanning over a decade. He explored non-Christian faiths (Scientology; Norse Neopaganism) before he identified as agnostic and, most recently, atheist. Only a few interviewees made the transition seem like it occurred in a short period of time (Juliana in particular, 7.2.3). Transitioning from belief in God to disbelief in God was a process that usually took months or years and often occurred in stages: initial doubt, acceptance of doubt, acknowledgment of a lack of belief, and labeling that lack of belief. Some interviewees, as exemplified by Patrick, also had a stage of searching for something religious or spiritual to believe in following initial doubt about their (usually) familial religion.

5.4.2 Ken

Ken is a 24 year-old self-employed small business owner and recent college graduate. He grew up in South-Eastern Ontario and has lived in Ottawa for five or six years. Ken's father is Catholic and he is not sure about his stepmother; his mother and stepfather believe in God but are not churchgoers. He is not sure what his sister believes. Although he thinks most of his friends believe in God, he does not think of them as religious. Ken went to church as a child, as well as Catholic elementary and high schools, but he does not consider himself to have ever been a strong Catholic. When asked when he started to doubt God's existence, Ken's replied:

Probably once I left for university. Because before then I never really asked any big questions, or worried about anything too large. So there wasn't an 'Aha' moment or anything like that. Just thinking! [...] Like; it just sort of, over time [I] sort of realized, "well there's not one." Yeah, I would say around university. Probably after the time I came out of the closet, because I was probably more concerned with that issue than the God issue at that point in my life.

Did you find it easier to come out as an atheist then? Did you do that first?

Oh, yeah, I came out before I became an atheist. I don't really come out as an atheist, like I don't tell people I don't believe in God, I just don't so I don't. It is not a conversation I'd bring up. I would say I am gay to people but I wouldn't say specifically I'm an atheist.

Ken did not self-identify as an atheist until he made some atheist friends about two years ago and he was suddenly around “words like that.” Identifying as such was not a huge change in terms of political, moral, and social policy views (“I’ve always had the same views; I just never spoke of the atheism part”).

As with the majority of interviewees, Ken gave the impression that he identified to the left of social, political, and moral issues prior to identifying as an atheist. As Ken put it, his views “stayed the same, before and after I identified as an atheist.” Ken also offers a unique perspective among these interviewees in that ‘coming out’ as an atheist is often compared to ‘coming out’ as homosexual, yet Ken has made a point of being open about his sexuality while he does not bring up his religious orientation with others. This may speak to the non-importance of atheism to his identity as compared to his sexuality; it can be seen as a desire to distance himself from conversations about religion (and atheism) with others; that conversations about religion (and atheism) do not come up often in his life; or various degrees of these reasons.

5.4.3 Juliana

Juliana is a 21 year-old undergraduate studying Political Science. She grew up in an Eastern Ontario town but has lived in the Ottawa Region (presently Gatineau while she attends school in Ottawa) for 12 years. Juliana describes her immediate family as atheist, and she has “quite a few atheist friends as well.” She was not raised to be religious, and she doubted God’s existence after equating him with Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy when she was about nine years-old: “I was trying to figure out Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy, God, all at the same time.” I was curious why she had to “figure” out God since she was raised “not religious,” so I asked

Juliana if she ever believed in God when she was a child, to which she explained that she was influenced by “friends at school and friends of my parents.”

Although Juliana’s transition from believer to nonbeliever comes across at first as straightforward and not being an overly huge concern, similar to realizing Santa is not real, during a later exchange the topic of her transition came up again:

I remember like when I was a kid I never practiced religion or whatever, I just kind of believed in God and then it didn’t really make sense, but when I did start to question it, now that I think about it, it was strange, like it was strange to conceive of the fact that there was no God, but that there was nothing else, no afterlife or anything like that. I mean, it didn’t take me long to get over it.

Since it was something she had to “get over” I asked Juliana if switching from a belief in God to not believing in God was a process, to which she replied:

Oh God, I don’t really remember. Maybe a very short one.

Okay, did it feel like a big deal at the time?

Yeah, because I think, also because I was interested in religion, that people could believe in something that is clearly full of contradictions in it, and so, yeah, for me it was like this huge revelation, like a huge discovery.

Juliana’s religious – and/or irreligious – background is unique among these interviewees in that she does not seem to consider her transition from what can arguably be considered a societally ‘normative’ childhood belief in God to disbelief in God to take more than a short time period. Yet she also acknowledges that it was “strange,” and a “huge revelation, like a huge discovery.” In her case the process was a short one, especially when compared to the backgrounds of other interviewees. Moreover, she was raised secular and continued along this vein into adulthood: even though she did believe in God as a child her secular upbringing remained relatively static – she can count the number of time she has attended church on one hand (“four times with a friend but never with my family”).

5.4.4 April

April is a 22 year-old undergraduate student studying Classics. She has lived in Europe, the Caribbean, British Columbia, and Eastern Ontario, and has lived in Ottawa for the previous eight years. April's father is an atheist and her mother was a Catholic. Most of her friends are atheist although she does have a pagan friend and a few Jewish friends, but not many Christian friends. April was raised Catholic and even attended a Catholic group for a brief period when she was 15, but she "gave up all religion forever when [she] was 17," following her mother's suicide, at which point she "firmly became an atheist." Prior to that tragic event she had already begun doubting her faith due in part to studying history ("when I studied the Crusades, that made me really question Christianity"), reconciling "things" like the treatment of women in the Bible, exposure to other religions, and her having gay friends in high school which led her to question the concept of Hell: "I was just angry with the concept of religion which would doom certain people to Hell for no other reason than the manner of their death or the fact that they were gay, or like, if you were a nonbeliever, just like this idea that, like, if you have any other faith – like if you live a good life with that faith, if it is not the right faith – you are going to Hell." She considered herself an "Easter and Christmas Christian" while she held "a willing suspension of disbelief for the good things" in Christianity, like the concept of Heaven.

When asked if she remembers the moment she first described herself as an atheist, April replied:

I think it was at my mom's funeral. Somebody came up to me and told me, "oh, well, you can have comfort that this is all part of God's plan," and when somebody told me that, that, like, my mom's suicide and the way I was feeling right now, and just the utter despair that I was in, could be part of any all-knowing creatures plan for me – plan for my life – meant to me that accepting he existed would mean that, like, nothing in my life mattered, that I had no direction, I had no control, nothing in my life was in control, and I hated that. I hated those words. I hated that person for saying that to me. It seemed to invalidate everything that I was feeling, like, 'oh well you shouldn't be sad because it is part of the master plan' you know, and that real... that made me angry, and I think I actually turned to her and I was like, "well I am an atheist so that doesn't matter." I was really angry.

She describes her lack of faith as something that cannot be overturned, (“it is as hard to re-believe in Santa Claus as to start re-believing in God”):

I barely had [faith] to begin with, and as I got older, and with the trauma I went through, there is no way I can get that faith back even if like all of the bad things in the Bible were overturned and suddenly like everybody was embraced as free and equal and they, you know, took out all of the terrible parts of the Bible that abdicated slavery and talked about how bad it was, you know, to be a woman or to be gay or to be anything that wasn't, you know, perfect, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't believe in something so fantastic.

April's transition from theist to atheist is atypical among my interviewees in that it included a significantly traumatic experience. Her transition was nonetheless a process which took some time: the traumatic event of her mother's suicide certainly played a role in the formulation of her (ir)religious orientation, but in and of itself it does not tell the whole story. Prior to that event, she had already started to doubt Catholicism, or at least consider it to be “a terrible religion,” and she had “already felt that it wasn't true,” but she maintained a “willing suspension of disbelief.” In other words, the trauma contributed considerably to the process, but it did not make for the entire process.

5.5 Discussion

The overwhelming majority of those I interviewed from both the ACUO and the NGAA went through a transitional process before they came to identify as an atheist. The exceptions are Brendon (8.1.3), Edward (7.1.3), Darryl (8.2.1), Elissa (9.2.2), Jean (6.2.1), Brian (7.2.1), and Derrick (9.2.1), all of whom claim to have *never* believed in God.³⁵⁸ These seven can be considered to have remained in a ‘stasis’ of disbelief (albeit a stasis which occasionally bends from the stretching of religious dispositions). There are no significant differences between the

³⁵⁸ In Edward's case he briefly considered Christianity as a teenager to deal with depression but he could never “fully” believe in God.

ACUO and the NGAA interviewees, so the discussion and conclusion that follow address all forty interviewees as a whole, unless otherwise specified.

All interviewees who were raised with a religion went through a transitional process of belief in God, (nominal or otherwise), to disbelief. Although Juliana's transition (5.4.3) from having a 'normative societal childhood' belief in God to an atheist took place over a shorter period of time than most, no one expressed or suggested that their transition was a *sudden* or overnight conversion. Some atheists, such as Wade (5.3.3), whose early doubt in Christianity was offset by a few years of identifying with paganism, and Patrick (5.4.1), whose transitional journey included shifts back toward religion (Catholicism, paganism, Scientology) before coming to identify as agnostic and then atheist, had longer transitions than others.

Some transitions or periods of doubt occurred as children while other took place in high school and/or university. In no cases, however, was a major event or a sudden experience the sole cause of the transition from believer to disbeliever. Even Krista (5.3.4), who was certainly influenced by the breakup of her parents' marriage when she was a teenager, recognized that her transition was a process that took time; it entailed "a lot of chipping away," as she put it. Likewise, April (5.4.4), who was influenced by a major tragedy with the death of a close loved one, recognized that her transition was a process that took time; prior to her mother's death she had already started to doubt her Christian faith.

The ages of when the transitions took place, in terms of initial doubt in religion and/or God to self-identification as an atheist, vary: nine identified as atheists when they were elementary school age (prior to grade nine); fourteen identified as such when they were at high school age (grade nine through twelve); and twelve began to identify as atheists when they were over 18 years-old. The remaining five interviewees never believed in God and remained in a

form of irreligious, or secular, stasis (two others who also never believed in God nonetheless expressed going through a period whereby they questioned religion and came to self-identify as ‘atheist’ and so are included in the numbers above). Even though the NGAA sample was more open in terms of age than that of the university-attending ACUO members, in that the ages of NGAA interviewees extended to 52, the numbers show a similarity in that the majority of them identified as atheist in their youth (Patrick, 5.4.1, being an exception). By ‘youth’ I mean between elementary and high school age. Including the five ‘static’ interviewees, twenty-eight of the forty interviewees identified as atheists before becoming 18 years-old.

Interestingly, many of the interviewees identified as left-of-centre on political, moral, and social issues prior to identifying as an atheist rather than after identifying as an atheist. If one informs the other, it would seem that one’s views on these issues more often than not inform one’s consideration of religion and atheism, rather than religion or atheism informing one’s views on politics and morality. This seems to be the case with at least twenty-five interviewees as deduced from their answers to the question “Has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views at all?” Only seven interviewees noted a significant change in their thinking on these issues after identifying as atheists, and the eight remaining interviewees provided answers that are difficult to categorize.³⁵⁹

³⁵⁹ I categorized Glen, James, Evelyn, Dan, Sylvia, Andrew, Matthew, Belinda, Heather, Gerard, Edward, Tracy, Elissa, Derrick, April, Hanna, Ken, Jean, Kevin, Natalie, Darryl, Hayden, Patrick, Nick, and George as ‘not having had a significant change in their political, moral, or social policy views after identifying with atheism’. I categorized Wade, Donovan, Krista, Colin, Ashley, Warren, and Brian as ‘having had a significant change in either their political, moral, or social policy views after identifying with atheism’. I categorized Brendon, Billy, Tonya, Alison, Mike, Juliana, Ian, and Cody, and as ‘difficult to categorize’. For a sense of how I came to categorize the interviewees see Appendix XII, which contains a table that features select quotations from each interviewee on the question “Has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views at all?”

Table 7: Political, moral, and social policy views

Has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views at all?	Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO)	Non-Group Affiliated Atheists (NGAA)	All Interviewees (ACUO and NGAA)
Yes	4	3	7
No	11	14	25
Difficult to Categorize	5	3	8

As with religious orientation, it is also the case that one's political, moral, and/or social policy views may shift during the course of one's life, and those shifts do not necessarily need to be related to one's belief or disbelief in God. The important point here is that since their transitions were overwhelmingly a process which often took years it was not often the case that an interviewee had to suddenly redefine or reconsider how they addressed many of the issues to which religion provides definition. If it was the case that atheists often '(de)convert' in a sudden or relatively short period of time – the reverse of the caricatured overnight conversion to belief in God, for instance – than one would assume it would entail a clear reformulation of answers to hot button issues, and this was not the case with these interviewees. This discussion now turns to an analysis of my findings on the process toward becoming an atheist through comparisons with related research.

On the issue of age, my findings reflect those of Sherkat and Bibby, both of whom regard age as a major factor for identifying as atheists or religious nones. The results from both sets of interviewees do show that the majority went through periods of doubt which led them to atheism during their youth (from elementary school to university age). This is also similar to findings in

this area by James Allan Cheyne and Fred W. Britton, who have written about the demography of nontheists. They conducted a study based on 2563 international survey respondents who self-identified or classified themselves as “atheists, agnostics, humanists, freethinkers, and sceptics,” which together they term “nontheist with a large subset of atheists.”³⁶⁰ Since respondents were recruited through atheist organizations, websites, and blogs they acknowledge that it is “possible that many attitudes were more strongly expressed than would have been the case in a less self-selected sample of the nonreligious,”³⁶¹ yet they nonetheless produced significant findings which are potentially applicable to those who belong to active atheist communities. They found that their nontheist respondents often came to identify as such during late adolescence: “Most nontheists reported coming to their current views during adolescence, most often between 16 and 20 regardless of their age of reporting [...] Slightly less than a quarter of individuals over 30 do report arriving at their unbelief after 30. Even seniors, however, most often reported coming to their current (ir)religious views during adolescence.”³⁶²

That most of the interviewees identified as atheist at a young age is not surprising for the ACUO sample, but since the NGAA sample includes thirteen individuals over the age of 25 it does agree with Sherkat’s argument that age is “negatively related to atheism” yet atheism, like theism, “seems to crystallize with age,”³⁶³ since those thirteen still identify as atheists. It also fits with Cheyne and Britton’s finding that seniors who identified as nontheist most often came to that self-identification during adolescence. This does, however, call into question Bibby’s argument that “the ‘no religion’ self-designation is often fairly temporary,”³⁶⁴ although since those thirteen older interviewees were selected *because* they were atheists the results were

³⁶⁰ Cheyne and Britton, *Beyond Disbelief*, 1 (emphasis in original).

³⁶¹ Ibid. 8.

³⁶² Ibid. 2.

³⁶³ Sherkat, 441-445.

³⁶⁴ Bibby, 4.

biased: I purposely chose not to include theists, thus the chance of interviewing a theist who had gone through an atheist phase was nullified. It does, however, point to a body of atheists in Canada who do remain relatively static, or confident, in their atheism as they age. Just as Bibby cautions that we should keep in mind that self-identifying as a religious none is often temporary, researchers should also be cautious not to assume young atheists are simply going through a phase they will grow out of when they become parents, as Bibby argues, or come across “impending doom,”³⁶⁵ as Sherkat argues.

Of the other factors Sherkat points to which increase the likelihood of identifying as an atheist (education, gender, race, becoming a parent, and geography), the first three are factors applicable to the ACUO and the NGAA, with the latter two not being applicable. The ACUO interviewees were not parents, and those of the NGAA who were parents were still atheists (becoming a parent did not shift them toward theism) by design of interview criteria. Geography certainly plays a role, although since all interviewees were selected because they live in the Ottawa area, the results primarily speak to that one location. Education was a factor for both groups, in that most were well-educated, but since many came to identify as atheists before university it cannot be claimed that higher education (above high school) was a major factor for many interviewees, although it certainly was for some. Informal education, in terms of reading books that tackle rather ‘heavy’ subjects, particularly Dawkins *The God Delusion*, was quite widespread amongst interviewees. Moreover, most interviewees came across as having seriously read about religion and atheism at some point in their lives and they knew the topics fairly well. Gender was clearly defined, with more men than women being in the ACUO sample simply because there were more men active in that community, and when it came to the NGAA my experience was that it was easier to find men than women who openly identified as atheist. Race

³⁶⁵ Sherkat, 441.

was also clearly a factor, since most of my interviewees were Caucasian. While it could be argued that the racial makeup of the NGAA group was influenced by the snowball sampling, Caucasian introducing me to another Caucasian, the same cannot be said for the ACUO since I simply interviewed those who were most active with that community, regardless of other factors such as race or ethnicity.

Of Phil Zuckerman's nine most common reasons for why the American apostates he interviewed rejected religion (parents; education; misfortune; other cultures/other religions; friends, colleagues, lovers; politics; sex; Satan and Hell; and, malfeasance of religious associates),³⁶⁶ some were clearly factors among my interviewees (parents; education; misfortune; friends, colleagues, lovers; and politics) while others were not (other cultures/other religions; sex; Satan and Hell; and malfeasance of religious associates). In fact, only one interviewee mentioned being influenced by learning about other cultures or religions (James, 5.3.1, who explored Buddhism while doubting his Christian faith), and only one mentioned questioning her religion because of 'concern' (which is different from "fear," which Zuckerman discusses³⁶⁷) surrounding the reality of Satan and Hell (April, 5.4.4, who criticized the notion that her gay friends were bound for Hell). Sex came up a few times, but more in mockery of Christian teachings than as a reason for questioning religion, although one interviewee, Gerard (8.1.1), did note that his doubt coincided with his desire to go down a "hedonistic path." Sexual identity came up during Ken's interview, (5.4.2.), although it was not raised as a factor toward his identifying with atheism, but rather, how he felt that his church's teachings on homosexuality likely kept him in the closet longer. Some members did, however, criticize religious discourse on homosexuality in reference to having gay friends and/or family members (Krista, 5.3.4; April

³⁶⁶ Zuckerman, 153-163.

³⁶⁷ Ibid., 162.

5.4.4). With the exception of Laura (9.1.2), whose church community blamed her uncle's contraction of AIDS (through a blood-transfusion his girlfriend had received) on what they assumed was a 'gay lifestyle,' the 'malfeasance of religious associates', in this case, insensitive comments of religious friends and family members, did not come up during my interviews with either group.

The other five reasons Zuckerman gives were much more prevalent in my interviews. On "parents" Zuckerman notes that "when only one parent is religious and the other one is lukewarm or an outright nonbeliever, the likelihood of apostasy for the children of such a couple is increased."³⁶⁸ As with Zuckerman, I found that a number of interviewees had one parent who was notably less religious than the other. Usually the parent who was least religious, or outright nonreligious, was the father, which correlates to Zuckerman's findings: "Person after person, in interview after interview, would recount how at least one of their parents – usually the father – was not all that religious."³⁶⁹ In fact, many interviewees mentioned that they did not know what their fathers believed with regard to religion, and a few had to think for a moment for 'clues' so as to guess at their fathers' religiosity. It seems accurate to conclude that having one parent who is nonreligious may be quite influential on the religiosity of an aging child, even if that influence is relegated to familiarity with, and acceptability of, those who are not religious.

Writing about how misfortune plays a role in rejecting religion, Zuckerman explains: "For some people, when they experience loss or pain in their lives, it leads them to question God's goodness, even God's existence. The untimely death of a parent, a bitter divorce, or even the loss of a beloved pet – such difficult experiences can ignite skepticism. [...] Rather than cling to God, they feel forsaken. While most people embrace or cling to their religion in the face of

³⁶⁸ Ibid., 153.

³⁶⁹ Ibid., 140.

personal difficulties, some do just the opposite.”³⁷⁰ This was certainly the case with a few interviewees, such as April (5.4.4), although tragic events or misfortune were not described as the sole reason for coming to identify as an atheist. In April’s case she had begun questioning religion prior to her mother’s death, but that event was quite an influential landmark in her path from theist to atheist.

Zuckerman’s point about friends, colleagues, and lovers being a factor is pretty straightforward and certainly applicable to many of my interviewees. In essence, those who are closest to us are often influential, and in the case of questioning faith quite a few were influenced by friends and lovers. Donovan (7.1.4), for example, was influenced by an atheist friend in school while he questioned Christianity and explored Norse mythology, and Krista (5.3.4) was influenced by an atheist boyfriend while she dealt with family issues, adjusting to university life, and attending a ‘new’ church of which she was critical.

Political leanings are one of the most interesting findings in my research, in that the results show that most interviewees from both groups leaned left before identifying as atheist and not the other way around. This correlates with Zuckerman’s argument that religiosity often correlates with right-wing conservatism, and by extension irreligiosity with left-wing liberalism, the latter of which Zuckerman frames in terms of left-wing views informing ones opinion on religion: “Some simply keep their progressive political convictions to themselves and continue to be actively religious. But for others, their progressive political convictions are too strong to be stifled or denied, and they subsequently feel unable or unwilling to continue participating in their politically conservative religious culture.”³⁷¹ While some interviewees raised concerns with social, moral, and/or political issues, they did not reference their left-wing views as what led

³⁷⁰ Ibid., 154-155.

³⁷¹ Ibid., 159.

them to question God's existence, although one can assume that holding left-wing leanings while attending right-wing religious services would have been an influence on questioning religion (although not all of the interviewee's previous denominations were right-wing, see Hanna, 7.2.4).

Cheyne and Britton have also written about the political leanings of atheists. In a report based on their study with nontheist international survey respondents, they found that their respondents were "particularly liberal with regard to social issues. In response to a question asking if they considered themselves liberal on social issues a striking 91% of our sample rated themselves as left of centre politically. Respondents were, however, considerably less liberal on fiscal matters."³⁷² I found this to also be the case with my interviewees. Overall they seemed socially liberal although there were a few areas in which many expressed conservatism, more so with regard to support for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the importance of free speech without being penalized for causing offense to any groups, than with fiscal matters. While these political concerns and opinions made occasional appearances in the interviews themselves, they came out more strongly in pre-and-post-interview banter, as well as through conversations held with the ACUO members while conducting participant-observation.

In "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism," Jesse M. Smith wrote about "the process through which individuals come to adopt the label atheist."³⁷³ His study is similar to mine in that it is based on data from participant-observation and forty interviews.

Smith recognized "four major elements" or stages, in "the construction of an atheist identity in America": the ubiquity of theism; questioning theism; rejecting theism; and 'coming

³⁷² Cheyne and Britton, 5.

³⁷³ Jesse M. Smith, 2011, "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism," *Sociology of Religion*, 72(2): 215-237; 217.

out' as an atheist.³⁷⁴ He argues that the “construction of an atheist identity is a fluid and dynamic process rather than one that follows any simple pattern or trajectory.”³⁷⁵ These findings correlate with mine, especially the fluidity of process rather than a simple trajectory. There are differences, however, in terms of the emphasis placed on each stage. ‘Coming out’ as an atheist, for example, seems to have been emphasised much more in Smith’s American sample than my Canadian one (it was also much more emphasized in Zuckerman’s sample³⁷⁶). There are other more subtle differences as well.

On their earlier religiosities, Smith explains that out of his forty interviewees:

Thirty-five of them described their upbringing as being somewhere between somewhat religious and extremely religious. They each expressed at least some belief in God; they each identified with a particular religion or spiritual philosophy, and they each participated in some kind of religious activity. This is consistent with the general composition and state of the American religious landscape.³⁷⁷

He also noted that even those who were raised in secular families were influenced by “the high levels of religiosity and belief present in the general milieu of American culture,”³⁷⁸ and that all forty participants “whether raised with religion or not, were surrounded by theist friends, neighbors, and others who influenced them significantly.”³⁷⁹ While many of my forty interviewees were raised “somewhere between somewhat religious and extremely religious,” there were at least nine who were raised secular, more if you consider those who were ‘culturally’ Catholic or Anglican but did not consider their religions to play a significant role in their upbringing. Moreover, when one parent is irreligious or apathetic to religion while the

³⁷⁴ Ibid., 219.

³⁷⁵ Ibid.

³⁷⁶ Zuckerman, 168. “One of the most common metaphors people employed in describing their apostasy was that it was akin to “coming out” as a homosexual. Such people said that they tried their hardest to be religious – and they had even convinced themselves for a spell that they did have faith – but in the end, they just couldn’t deny their internal irreligiosity any longer, and they had to simply admit and embrace the atheism or agnosticism that seemed to be at the core of their being.” The metaphor of ‘coming out’ as an atheist, as well as the notion that atheism was a struggle to come to grips with, was rare amongst my interviewees; it certainly was not a main theme.

³⁷⁷ Smith, 220.

³⁷⁸ Ibid., 221.

³⁷⁹ Ibid., 222.

other is religious does that mean the upbringing, in terms of influence, is half and half? To frame this another way, if one parent is at least nominally religious and the other is nonreligious, as in the case with Sylvia (5.3.2) whose mother was Baptist and father an atheist, it would seem misleading to note the “somewhat religious” influence of her mother without acknowledging the opposite from her father, who often went flying or fishing when her mother was at church. Using their own explanations of their upbringings, however, it seems fair to say that amongst my interviewees there was a good mix of those who were raised secular, those who were raised nominally religious, and those who were raised very religious.

Smith also found that most of his interviewees “started experiencing significant doubts about the existence of God when they left their homes for the first time to begin college,” and that “[n]ew relationships with friends, professors, and others prompted and drove this questioning.”³⁸⁰ While there were those who began doubting and/or first identified as atheist during college or university, for the majority of my interviewees (twenty-three out of thirty-five, the other five from my sample of forty did not express a period of coming to identify as an atheist, having never believed in God) this period of doubt and nonreligious identity construction occurred at the elementary or high school age.

Another difference is Smith’s finding that “[b]ecause of the stigmatized and deviant status of atheism, it can initially be difficult to claim the identity in a social setting;”³⁸¹ and that “many had experienced a period of time where the ‘internal pressure’ built up to the point where they felt a strong desire to adopt the label publicly.”³⁸² While stigmatism was brought up by some interviewees (see chapter 9), claiming an atheist identity publicly did not come across as a general concern in my interviews, and no one mentioned “internal pressure” building up and

³⁸⁰ Ibid., 222.

³⁸¹ Ibid., 229.

³⁸² Ibid., 230.

leading to a desire to make one's atheism public. Most interviewees found that religion did not come up in 'polite conversation' in Canada, which may explain why this was less of a concern (see Chapter 8). Moreover, whereas Smith argues that "[i]n the United States, theism is not only the starting point for any religious identity; its pervasiveness is also what drives atheism,"³⁸³ some of my interviewees, such as Warren (8.2.2), were of the opposite opinion with regard to Canada: When I asked if he belonged to any atheist communities, Warren replied: "No, other than the general population!"

Similarities between Smith's interviewees and mine include an interest in New Atheism which "piqued interest in other media critical of religion and belief,"³⁸⁴ and that "atheists tended to doubt because they found no evidence of God's existence, or they could not square religious doctrines with empirical facts, or simply, the notion of God was inconsistent with their intellectual sensibilities and developing view of the world."³⁸⁵ Indeed, many of my interviewees mentioned the New Atheists as influences, some, such as Andrew (6.1.2), Matthew (9.1.4), Belinda (9.1.1), Natalie (8.2.3), Cody (8.2.4), and Patrick (5.4.1) cite at least one New Atheist as playing a pivotal role in their transition toward atheism. Interestingly, Andrew, Matthew, and Belinda, each a member of the ACUO and between 20 and 21 years of age, were influenced by Dawkins around the same time, during junior high or high school, which points to the popularity and cultural influence of *The God Delusion* in the mid-to-late 2000's. The interest in "empirical facts" and, as Smith also explains, interpreting the world "through the lens of science and secular thinking,"³⁸⁶ was certainly present in the vast majority of my interviewees, and often started at a young age. In fact, an interest in science and a preposition toward critical (as opposed to

³⁸³ Ibid. 232.

³⁸⁴ Ibid., 223.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., 225.

³⁸⁶ Ibid., 227

‘secular’, which Smith uses) thinking seems to have been present at a young age in most of those I interviewed. This is particularly evident when considering that a few interviewees became critical of God’s existence after learning a lesson about being lied to by adults when they discovered Santa Claus was not real (see Sylvia 5.3.2; Mike 8.1.1; Juliana 5.4.3; George 9.5.5).

The main similarity between my findings and those of Smith is that, with the exception of the few who were raised and remained secular, coming to identify as an atheist was a process. As Smith explains: “the process of questioning their beliefs and the existence of God tended to take time [...A]nd because religious beliefs and practices are socially learned, there must take place an unlearning process for those who eventually come to reject it.”³⁸⁷ While there were differences in the degrees to which the processes occurred, and in what was emphasised as main concerns between our samples, coming to identify as an atheist was for the majority of my interviewees, a “slow progression,”³⁸⁸ as Smith explains. Moreover, the following quote from Smith applies just as much to my interviewees as they did for his participants: “[T]here are variations in terms of specific life experiences and personal biographies. No one became an atheist in exactly the same way.”³⁸⁹

5.6 Conclusion

When it comes to the process by which atheists came to identify as such, there are no significant differences between the ACUO and the NGAA interviewees. Besides age, which was a demographic bias (I chose to include older adults in the NGAA sample as that is where the snowball sampling led) other factors were quite similar and some of those factors were also

³⁸⁷ Ibid., 223.

³⁸⁸ Ibid.

³⁸⁹ Ibid. 233.

similar to findings from other studies on atheism. Writing about how his interview subjects came to reject religion through a process, Zuckerman explains:

the overwhelming majority of those whom I interviewed described their apostasy as a gradual process. While there were perhaps a handful of atypical individuals who had experienced certain immediate, faith-shattering “A-ha!” moments, most did not. Rather their rejection of religion was an incremental process, taking place over a period of three to five years, sometimes longer.³⁹⁰

He also notes that “it was rare for someone to pin his or her apostasy on one specific cause. More commonly, people said that their apostasy was the result of numerous factors, working in conjunction with one another, steadily compounding over time.”³⁹¹ These observations speak to those I interviewed as well, the majority of which came to their atheism through a process which often took years.

Interviewees varied in that some were raised secular, some nominally religious, and some very religious. It was not uncommon for an interviewee to have one religious parent and one irreligious parent, the latter usually being the father. Many began to question their religions at an early age (between elementary school age and university age), which shows a propensity toward critical thinking, and often coincided with an interest in science.

Common factors for why interviewees self-identified as atheist include the influence of parents, friends, and education, experiencing personal tragedy or misfortune, and identifying to the left politically. Less common factors include the learning about other cultures and religions, questioning religious commentary pertaining to sex and sexuality, grappling with the concept of Hell, and rejecting malfeasant religious associates. Unlike Zuckerman’s listing of these factors, in my samples those I separate as “less common” were barely raised at all, and a significant number of interviewees expressed another factor: that their questioning really began when they realized Santa Claus was not real and they associated that ‘Christmas lie’ with Jesus.

³⁹⁰ Zuckerman, 151.

³⁹¹ Ibid.

The majority of interviewees identified to the left on social, moral, and political issues before they identified as atheists. Although interviewees did not stress political leanings as a main factor in identifying as atheist, it can be assumed that when one's religious and political orientations diverge the internal conflict that may arise would lead to some serious questioning about faith and worldview. It was rare for interviewees to express that they had to reposition themselves politically, socially, or morally after rejecting (usually) familial religions.

Overall, the similarities between the ACUO and the NGAA demonstrate that how one came to self-identify as an atheist does not necessarily point to why one may or may not join an active atheist community. The next chapter deals specifically with that question: why do some Ottawa-area atheists join groups while others do not?

Chapter Six: To Join or not to Join: Choosing to Belong to an Atheist Community

I didn't necessarily have a particular interest in doing sort of advocacy or, you know, awareness or anything; I just wanted the social aspect, to meet like-minded people I guess.

– Belinda, 22, undergraduate student in Economics

Just hanging out with other atheists seems kind of unnecessary.

– Jean, 29, Public Servant (Government of Canada)

Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith have written about the strategies atheist groups in the United States use to gain traction in that country, and in doing so they have uncovered some of the reasons why atheists and secular humanists join atheist or secular humanist organizations and communities. One such finding is that many participants “viewed themselves as an embattled minority with an uncertain future in religious America.”³⁹² In order to counter this negative identity based on unequal status they find a positive identity through involvement with groups:

Many of our interviewees underwent a gradual process of finding and constructing an atheist or secular humanist identity, often including involvement in various humanist and liberal religious groups. Becoming involved in secular humanism was for many a way of claiming a positive identity, whereas claiming the atheist label was often viewed as just being against religion.³⁹³

Moreover, Cimino and Smith also found that “the transition from being an inactive or ‘nominal’ secular individual to becoming involved in secular humanist groups and activism was often instigated by contact and growing concern with individuals and issues associated with the religious right.”³⁹⁴ Cimino and Smith thus offer three reasons why American atheists and secular humanists join atheist/secular groups: they want to counter their negative minority status, they

³⁹² Cimino and Smith, “Secular,” 413.

³⁹³ Ibid., 414.

³⁹⁴ Ibid., 418.

find positive identities together in numbers, and they are concerned about the religious right. While these reasons are relevant to the American experience, do they also resonate with ‘active’ Canadian atheists, those who belong to atheist organizations that meet in person?

This chapter is informed by two questions: “why do some atheists in Canada, in this case members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO), choose to join atheist communities?” and, pertaining to interviews with non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA), “why do some atheists not choose to join atheist communities?” Since American scholars have addressed the question of why people join atheist groups I draw on their research, as well as some findings from the United Kingdom, to reflect on my Canadian data. Due to cultural and geographical proximity the US makes for a useful comparison, as does the UK for its historical and contemporary cultural ties to Canada.

6.1 Joining an Atheist Community: ACUO

My primary hypothesis when initially formulating the questions relevant to this chapter (“Why did you decide to join an atheist community?” and “Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?”) was that atheists who join groups might have previously felt some degree of isolation or rejection from religious or spiritual friends and/or family members, especially after announcing their irreligion. I also assumed that for those who had been part of a religious community, belonging to a group might have been an important part of their life experience, and as a result, those members would find comfort in terms of shared experiences as well as a communal replacement for religion. My last preconception was that real or perceived societal marginalization of atheism would play a role in the sense that members would want to challenge societal expectations of the “necessity of religion” and prevent the erosion of recently

made progress or gains by atheism. At the very least, I expected to hear that the club would have as a focus the promotion of atheism.

Although there was some small support for these expectations, in the end they were not a significant part of the explanations offered by the participants for their choice to join the ACUO. The representative members for this section who will help shed light on why some members joined the ACUO are Glen, Andrew, Evelyn, and Billy.

6.1.1 Glen

Glen is an 18 year-old second-year undergraduate chemistry student. He is from a small “pretty white, fairly Christian” town in central Ontario; he moved to Ottawa to attend university. His father is French Catholic but does not identify as religious, and his mother is “very tight-lipped about her religious and political beliefs” so Glen does not know what she believes about God or religion. When he was young he “probably professed some kind of belief” but when he was in either the fourth or fifth grade he recalls that religion came up in class and he did not believe in it, thinking it was “just a way to control people.” Around grade nine he read Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, but by then he already identified as an atheist.

Glen has both atheist friends and Christian friends. He decided to join an atheist community because he saw a message on the university clubs’ page and it “was just really nice to find a community of people who kind of thought like me in certain ways.” When I asked Glen to describe what the atheist community means to him, he explained:

Okay. Well, as I said a group of like-minded individuals, you know, they tend to be obviously secular and a lot are interested in science and things like that and then also the general skeptical movement, which I think at least most of us would identify ourselves with. And so yeah, obviously nice to have like-minded people and also I think it is also a venue for social events you know, getting together with people at pubs generally, or people’s houses, and also kind of an opportunity to view skeptical media together. Like, we had our little movie night. That was fun.

Yeah, yeah.

Also, I viewed it as an opportunity for activism – or outreach anyway – with things like Reason Week, which was entertaining for sure.

[...]

Um, okay you mentioned activism and then you backtracked and said outreach. How do you describe things like Reason Week?

Um, well, I think one of the main purposes of Reason Week was to gain visibility and I think we certainly accomplished that. Um, especially with one specific group, obviously³⁹⁵, but um, and outreach I think is, is, you know, um; Reason Week we got some people to sign up.

Glen is an example of a member who joined the ACUO in order to meet “like-minded people”; those who “kind of thought like” him in “certain ways” such as having an interest in science and scepticism. Belonging to a community with like-minded people was the most popular answer in terms of why people joined and what the community meant to them. Atypical is Glen’s mentioning of activism and outreach. Glen is one of only two interviewees who gave answers that relate to having a desire to do advocacy work or raise awareness for atheism or atheism-related causes (in his case he mentioned activism in response to the question about meaning, referring primarily to Reason Week; the other interviewee mentioned advocacy for why he joined but he subsequently found it lacking in the group). A few even expressed the opposite – having no interest in activism. In response to the question about why she joined, Belinda (see 9.1.1), for example, stated “I didn’t necessarily have a particular interest in doing sort of advocacy or, you know, awareness or anything; I just wanted the social aspect, to meet like-minded people I guess.”

6.1.2 Andrew

Andrew is 21 years of age and is currently a third year undergraduate in sociology. He grew up in a small village in Southern Ontario, and he describes his family as “a split between Roman Catholics entirely on my dad’s side and then Presbyterian on my mom’s side.” As a

³⁹⁵ Here he is likely referring to Muslims who often stopped by the tables at Reason Week to engage in robust discussions primarily pertaining to Islam and atheism. See section 4.2.5.

child he occasionally went to a Presbyterian church when his “grandmother was around” but his immediate family were not avid churchgoers. He describes his youthful belief in God as “generic Christian” because of the influences on both sides of his family, but by age fourteen or fifteen when he was “probably halfway through *The God Delusion*” he identified as an atheist. At fifteen his parents asked him if he believed in God, to which he “just said no.” His parents were disappointed, although, as he explains, their disappointment lay more with themselves than about, or with, him: “They were more disappointed, more in themselves, for not properly raising me, and bringing me to church enough and that kind of thing. It wasn't that they were disappointed in me for not believing in God anymore.” Although Andrew had, and still has, religious friends, prior to university he did not know any other atheists. When I asked Andrew why he decided to join an atheist community, he replied:

Ah, I, like I said, I hadn't had any atheist friends before and I had only been an atheist for I think it would have been two or three years by then but, ah, around my primarily Christian friends, some Muslim friends you have to... I had to just make sure I didn't say anything on either chance that I would offend them or start a debate at a time when that would have made either myself or everyone else uncomfortable so, just people I can actually talk to without saying, “oh, evolution this,” and then see a bunch of angry stares, so I wanted to meet people who I could talk about this stuff without knowing that it is going to turn into a debate. I am fine with debating with people but if it happened every time you try to say something on a topic it just gets a bit annoying.

Yeah. Are you still friends with Muslims and different groups?

Yeah.

Okay.

I have all the same friends I just have more that I don't have to worry about offending. A few of them I have talked with and debated religion with. No one ever changes their mind.

Andrew has religious friends, but in the ACUO he found a community where he can speak freely about matters which some of his religious friends may find offensive. He joined the ACUO because it offers him a place for communication and expression of what some people may consider controversial ideas where the chance of causing offence to another person is minimalized. Following joining the community to meet like-minded people, joining so as to enjoy a safe space free from offending others is the second most cited reason given by interviewees.

6.1.3 Evelyn

Evelyn is from a city just outside of Toronto, but she has lived in Ottawa for the past three years. She is 19 years old and is an undergraduate in History. She does not believe in God but does not identify with the term ‘atheist’, because she feels “that is a very strong word that tends to throw people off,” and she does not feel the need to label her “nonbelief of something.” When asked how she would describe herself she said she is a nonbeliever.

Evelyn describes her family as “very religious” with one Catholic parent and one Jewish parent. She was raised Catholic (“First Communion, Confirmation, Baptism; all that good jazz”) and was an altar girl, although her family also celebrated the Jewish high holidays. After some youthful rebellious mischief at her public school, she switched to a Catholic school in grade eleven, where she became quite active as part of the chaplaincy team, even leading religious retreats. It was while attending university in Ottawa that she began to have serious doubts about her religion, and then religion in general. She points to an incident whereby a priest made some comments to the congregation about women’s rights that she found offensive as the moment she stopped going to church, with the exception of occasionally continuing to attend church with her immediate family. Her contemplation of the Vatican’s wealth also disturbed her, turning her off religion even more. She was further influenced by some of her atheist friends who belonged to the ACUO, and because she thought one of them was “so cute” and she figured the ACUO would have “like-minded people” she decided to join the club. When asked what the community means to her she explained:

Um, honest; I just think, I just think it’s, it’s just a group of people that have in common... it’s the same thing as any other group. It’s just people with common interests, and that don’t want to be judged for something that they take to be real and they can just sort of share it with each other, and...

Share?

Like, their disbelief, or, you know, their commonalities, like drinking together. I don't know if you like watching the [Facebook] wall? The, you know, "The Drinking Community of Ottawa with an Atheism Problem."

Yeah, somebody said that before too and I was just like, "that's a great quote; such a great line."

It is, um, but you know, I have a safe spot from the rest of... and I don't find that... I find the religious groups on campus to be a little bit pushy. What I find, it is like the atheist community, like, "[let's get] together and just not worry about that," and "hey guys, this is really ridiculous," and "this happened to me and it was really..." like; I don't know. [...] And they can kind of just be there for each other; sort of sounds a little cheesy.

Evelyn's immediate reason for joining – that she found a member cute – is atypical (she is the only one to cite that as a reason), but the other reason she gives, "taking to like-minded people," is the most common. Although she mentioned being "there for each other" as one of the things the ACUO means to her, that it not a common response; more typical is the notion that it is a safe spot from being 'judged', as is the repetition of the 'drinking club' meme, that the ACUO is "a drinking club with an atheism problem," as James (5.3.1) put it. Although being there for each other was an atypical response, in terms of the club offering 'support' it did come up a few times. Interestingly, however, when it did come up it always related to one of the things the ACUO *potentially* offered, but never something that the interviewee claimed to have needed or utilized for his or herself.

6.1.4 Billy

Billy is a 23 year-old undergraduate student in his final year of Physics. He grew up in a Northern Canadian city and moved to Ottawa for school. Billy describes his immediate family as secular although they did go to the United Church a few times on holidays, such as Easter, while he was growing up. He went to a Catholic school from kindergarten to grade eight but he never believed any of their religious teachings. He recalls praying communally in school but does not recall ever believing in God, nor does he recall understanding what believing in God really meant to other people: "I didn't know how other people believed in God [...] it just

wasn't a distinction that was necessary back then. I knew that there were people who were religious but I didn't really know what that meant, like; ...how severe of a state it could be." He is certain that by high school he did not believe in God, but the topic of God or religion was not a concern for him until later. He started identifying with the term 'atheism' when he came to university and became "a little more [...] wise to the dangers of human behaviour." While at university he sought out an atheist club to join, and even considered starting his own. When he discovered an online message announcing a start-up club called the ACUO he immediately joined. He attributes that decision to "a combination maybe of social isolation and wanting, you know, I wanted to make more friends and also that I kind of wanted to, ah, just talk to... I really like to have conversations." When I asked Billy to describe what the atheist community means to him he replied:

Ah, that's tough. I think that, I think it's almost like the debating society. I think that in a way a lot of what we, I mean, as in terms of 'atheism' itself not just the skepticism, because I mean, I can say that now the atheist community, what it means to me, the one that I belong to has a lot to do with trying to inject sort of skeptical ideas into the larger community that we live in, especially when there's other groups around that try to do the opposite, or at least what I believe to be the opposite, if you want to put it like that. It's possible that they're smarter than me, and that they are actually more skeptical than I am and just not calling themselves that, but I don't really think that that's the case. So, I think that in a way it really is about that, like making as much as we can – making people that aren't already aware, making them more aware of, um, ah, skeptical thinking and the reasons why it is so important when you are trying to make decisions about human happiness and society. But I say in general if you are talking more about the 'atheist' part of the atheist community I'd say I don't identify with that as much anymore, and it doesn't mean as much to me. The skeptical part does mean a lot more to me. I am an atheist so it does mean something to me, um, but I think it is me trying, not me specifically, but I think it's an attempt to get people who call themselves atheists and who are really in one way or another opposed to, um, organized religion for example, to be able to organize their ideas about that, ah, in a friendly environment, like in an environment full of people who think similarly and being able to... so for example: later you have to defend yourself against someone who might challenge you, which does happen a lot to atheists, maybe not so much in this country but especially nearby in the States it happens a lot. Um, to be able to defend yourself like that sometimes you need to reiterate your ideas and have them rephrased to you by other people who share them maybe. All sorts of things like that, so that's a big part of it. I think that is the most important part of the atheist part specifically. People being able to defend themselves.

He clarified that by "debating" he meant "sort of light debating," referring to conversations that organically serve to "break down" arguments.

Billy offers an example of an atypical answer to the question of joining the ACUO, in that he specifically mentions “social isolation,” making more friends, and engaging in more conversations. Likewise his answer for what the ACUO means to him is also atypical in that he focuses on the discussions, or “light debating,” that the community was often engaged in with each other. Although these answers certainly relate to meeting like-minded people I take them to stand on their own and also offer additional insight into the phenomenon that was the ACUO. It is also worth noting that, although not a common response, Billy is nevertheless not alone in explaining that he was less interested in atheism (at the time of the interview) than he was when he initially joined the community. Mike (8.1.1), for example, mentioned that at the time he decided to join the ACUO he was “more militant” than he was at the time of the interview.

6.2 Not Joining an Atheist Community: NGAA

I reformulated my initial questions to better suit this group of interviews, “Why did you decide to join an atheist community?” became “Do you belong to any atheist communities that meet in person?” and “Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?” became “Have you ever thought about joining an atheist community that meets in person?” The surprises I found in relation to joining made me reluctant to develop any detailed hypotheses about why some atheists might not choose to join an atheist community: I was simply interested in learning more about how they think about themselves as atheists in relation to the notion of an atheist community. This section explores why some atheists do not belong to atheist communities that meet in person through the examples of Jean, Hayden, Nick, and Ashley.

6.2.1 Jean

Jean is a 29 year-old employee of the Government of Canada with an interest in independent movie videography. He has previously lived in Winnipeg and Montreal, and has lived in Ottawa for five years. Jean's siblings are "probably not" atheists and his parents are "not really practicing" religion anymore. His friends are mostly atheist and, interestingly, he describes as "sad" the fact that he does not "know anybody who says they can't go meet me because they have to go do some sort of religious obligation." He grew up Catholic, was baptized and confirmed, and went to church every Sunday until he was in "maybe elementary school grade 3/4" when his father went to work away from home and the rest of his immediate family started sleeping in on Sundays. Of this period he says: "I never really unbelieved, I just never really made up my mind." When asked if he has ever believed in God, Jean explained that he did not because he "never really understood what it was, this whole thing that was being taught to me in church," yet it was not until his second last year of university, during which he began reading literature on and by atheists (such as Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris) that he came to identify as an atheist.

When I asked Jean if he had ever thought about joining an atheist community that meets in person, he responded:

It occurred to me. Basically, I guess that I moved quite a few times in my life, [...] so every time you move somewhere, you have got to start new, you have got to start fresh, you know? There is a church nearby my place and I... and there is always people there. Like, it is always packed and they are playing basketball on Friday nights and it's like, 'hey that would be a great place to go and meet people,' and so obviously from that I am like, 'well obviously the benefits of religion are the ability to meet people very quickly who have shared, you know, interests, and isn't that tempting. Maybe I should also go look for, you know, a group like that as well.' So, it did occur to me, you know, I looked up the meet-up groups, so under 'atheism groups' and things, and at the end I didn't really feel that that was necessarily what I would want to be the foundation of relationships or friendships. I mean I believe that's where I stand but is it so important to me that that's the thing that I am going to use as a foundation for my future circles of friends? It is not enough, it's not important enough. I don't want to, maybe, once in a while I could, you know, have a conversation about religion with a friend at dinner but it's not something I want to be there, like, 'oh, we met through the atheist group.' It's like, "ahhhhhhhhh!"

Like, I see what you mean, it's like, yeah... it's not like it is the number one element of your identity, right?

I have hobbies right! So I would rather meet people who also do those hobbies. So there is just less pulling me in. I mean, I had no options. It's a very good, you know, I would probably jump towards like a group that has, like, meet-up like language groups you can get together and learn a language and talk a language – just for fun, you know? [...] I don't see the attraction in terms of... unless you wanted a really changed world and be a part of some sort of active, you know, group. Just hanging out with other atheists seems kind of unnecessary.

Here Jean expresses that he would rather join a group based on one of his hobbies, or an educational group (such as a language-based meet-up group) than a strictly atheist community. As with many other interviewees with similar opinions, however, Jean is not entirely dismissive of the idea, as he has considered joining one before. Ultimately though, he considers such a group to be “unnecessary” and he would not want to base a friendship around atheism because he does not feel that atheism is “important enough.”

6.2.2 Hayden

Hayden is an employee of the Government of Canada who has a PhD in History. He is 33 years of age. He was born in Vietnam, and moved to Western Canada when he was a child. He moved to Ottawa in 2006. He describes himself as an atheist, a humanist, and a rationalist. He was raised with a “Buddhist background” but his family are “not practicing Buddhists.” He describes his upbringing as “culturally Buddhist with a mix of Confucian and Catholicism because Vietnam was part of a French colony and has Catholic influence.” Religion was not “practiced or forced” on him because, as he explains, “we lived through the war and when you have war you start questioning about God. If there is a God why is there so much suffering?” His parents tried to raise him and his sister to “not be influenced by any particular ideology in general. It doesn't have to be religion but it can be Communism,” although they did occasionally attend a Buddhist monastery for social events. When he came to Canada he converted to Catholicism because “the Catholic system provided a better education.”

Hayden cannot recall the exact moment he began identifying as an atheist, although he does point to the events of 9/11 as making him question religion, something he considers “the defining moment in [his] life.” When I asked Hayden if he belongs to any atheist communities that meet in person, the short, straightforward exchange went as follows:

No, I go to some meetings, one of them is the Ottawa Inquiry, the one, I think you are aware of it.

Is this like, a meet-up group or...

Yeah it's a...

I am familiar more with the Centre for Inquiry.

That's it, but I don't go to them very often, mainly because I don't have time.

Did you actively seek out a group to join or did you just...

It was more out of curiosity. For me on my spare time I prefer to read up on these issues and be informed and I prefer discussion like this more than in a group. When a group of like-minded [people] sit down to talk there is not a whole lot of discussion, mainly because you are on the same side, but for a discussion with people who you have fundamental differences makes it more interesting, just having debates.

Hayden's reason for not joining an atheist community that meets in person is interesting in that it shares a similar theme with that of many ACUO members, a theme which for those members is a reason for joining. That theme is the “like-minded” nature of these groups. Whereas members of the ACUO find this a positive attribute of their club, Hayden sees it as negative drawback. To Hayden a gathering of like-minded people are less prone to engage in meaningful discussions than a gathering of those who hold “fundamental differences” of opinion. As with Jean, Hayden is not entirely dismissive of the notion of joining an atheist community. He has visited a group in the past “out of curiosity,” but it apparently did not hold enough interest for him to return; he would rather spend his spare time reading up on issues or holding deeper small-scale discussions, as he alludes to with reference to our interview.

6.2.3 Nick

Nick is a 49 year-old small business owner who also studies' architecture. He has lived in Ottawa for twenty-five years. He has a few atheist friends but most of his friends have faith, or “a belief in belief,” as he put it. His “wife and her entire family are three generations of

atheists.” Nick was raised by his mother who was “very strong in her faith” which was nominally United Church although they did not attend church very often. Instead, his mother would often pray at home, saying “Where-so-ever two or more are gathered in my name, there so am I.” Nick started to doubt his faith in Christianity between the ages of eight and ten: “The more I thought about it the more other things I read; I started realizing, ‘no, their can’t be a God, because all of this – everything, all of this reality – is explainable by science, and it’s explainable by our own conceptions of science,’ you know?” He started publically identifying as an atheist in grade nine or ten.

When I asked Nick if he belonged to any atheist communities that meet in person he replied:

No! I always wondered what the rallying, like... back in high school, now, one of my world religion classes, we were talking about that and my teacher at the time was great because you could never figure out his religion. Literally he would talk about Hinduism and it was like he was evoking it, and Buddhism same thing. Christianity; everything. Beautiful teacher, but a lousy human being; but beautiful teacher. He often said – talking about atheists – was, “what’s the rallying cry for atheists,” you know, “they don’t have churches they go to,”... because now apparently there is an atheist [church... I mean, y]ou sit around and talk about the nonexistence of a Supreme Deity? Sorry, you can go to a coffee shop and do that.

I then asked Nick if he had ever thought about joining an atheist community that meets in person, to which he explained: “If there was one in Ottawa I would be interested in checking it out as long as it is not the New Atheists. Because they just drive me crazy.”

Nick serves as another example of an interviewee who does not feel a need to join an in-person atheist community. In Nick’s case, he does not understand why atheists would want to gather together, at least in a church setting, based simply on their being atheists, as evident from his summary of such a community as people who “sit around and talk about the nonexistence of a Supreme Deity.” To Nick, that can just as easily be done at a coffee shop. Although this sounds rather dismissive of atheist communities in general, Nick does add that he would be interested in “checking” one out, with the stipulation that it was not associated with or influenced

by New Atheism (which assumedly refers to the aggressiveness often associated with that movement).

6.2.4 Ashley

Ashley is a 26 year-old writer. She grew up in the prairies and Southern Ontario, and has lived in Ottawa for the past nine years. She identifies as an atheist as well as an agnostic atheist and occasional antitheist. Both Ashley's family and childhood community were "overwhelmingly Roman Catholic." She was very involved with Catholicism growing up, and was even "the first female altar server" at two churches. Ashley describes her family as "ridiculously religious." She "came out" to her parents "as an atheist bisexual studying [elements of sexuality]" during a religious holiday about three years ago. Her parents were not impressed, and her relationship with them is now quite complicated. Although she thinks she was an atheist "for a lot longer than that," she came to identify as such following discussions with her atheist boyfriend a few years ago. Most of her friends are atheists, although she also has friends who are religious believers.

When I asked Ashley if she belonged to any atheist communities she explained that she "used to be a part of CFI Canada," but she "quit in the summer." Ashley was dismayed with what she saw happening at the national level in terms of power dynamics and the problematic conduct of a particular individual, but she does note that although she "left the organization officially" she "didn't leave the community." I asked her why she decided to join an atheist community in the first place, to which she replied: "Because in leaving religion I left a community and I really miss that sort of, all of us bound by central ideas and the support that you get from people. Communities are important. So, I was looking for something similar within

atheism, and I was able to find that through CFI.” When I asked her what the atheist community had meant to her she explained how it was a place where her views were considered as important or worthy as anyone else’s, regardless of her age or gender:

[I]t was a really incredible feeling knowing that I *do* actually have something worth saying or that people think I have something worth saying as well. It’s huge and not having that gaslighting thing of, “yes, yes, you are very smart but you don’t know enough about this stuff,” which I got a lot from my family. It was huge, and that kind of acceptance can be really overwhelming emotionally.

She also explained that “getting involved with atheism gave me so much more information about issues of social justice whether it be race issues, trans issues, disability issues, [...f]eminism, all of that, I have learned so much more ever since joining atheism.”

Ashley offers a different perspective from all but one other interviewee (Ian – see 7.4.3.3.) in that she used to belong to an atheist community that met in person but she has since quit (although she still maintains friendships with members of that community). For her the community was a place where she was accepted and her opinions were respected. It was a place of support and it replaced the community she lost when she abandoned Catholicism. The reason she presently does not belong to such a group is therefore unique among my interviewees in that she clearly understands and appreciates the concept of atheist communities, but her quitting was politically motivated in that she disagreed with the national (leadership) politics of her former community.

6.3 Discussion

With regard to the ACUO interviewees, the most common response to the question “Why did you decide to join an atheist community?” was that it was a safe place to meet and converse with “like-minded” people. The most common response to the question “Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?” was to associate the community with “like-minded”

people. Five interviewees used the actual phrase “like-minded” to the first question, and five interviewees used the actual phrase “like-minded” in response to the second question. If you include phrases such as people who “think like me,” or “think like I do,” then ten of the twenty interviewees cited meeting or engaging with like-minded people with regard to the first question on why they joined the ACUO. If you factor in similar phrases in response to the club’s meaning, and do not double-count any individuals who answered similarly to both questions, then twelve of the twenty members interviewed either joined because of a desire to meet like-minded people or find meaning in the community from associating with like-minded people.³⁹⁶

The second most cited reason for both the first question regarding joining and the second question regarding the community’s meaning to an interviewee were also the same: that the ACUO is a safe place where the ‘problem’ of offending others is minimized. Four interviewees mentioned not causing offence as their primary reason for joining (two using the actual word “offend”, others using appropriations), and an additional two separate individuals mentioned being able to discuss things openly without causing offence to anyone as something the community means to them (again, with two using the actual word “offend” and others using appropriations), which means that belonging to a community where one could speak freely without causing offence was important to eight of the twenty interviewees.

More atypical responses included a desire to engage in activism, a lack of desire to engage in activism, an enjoyment of debating, an enjoyment of a shared sense of humour, and the oft-cited club authored meme (which can be traced back to the first club president), “we’re a drinking club with an atheism problem.”

³⁹⁶ See Appendix XII for a table that features select quotations derived from the ACUO responses to the two above noted questions which inform this section.

For the NGAA, the most common response to the question “Have you ever thought about joining an atheist community that meets in person?” was “no,” with twelve interviewees dismissing the idea as suitable for themselves (but not necessarily dismissing it as suitable for others). Eight interviewees answered “yes”, (this includes the two who had recently quit one such community).³⁹⁷ The reasons cited for not joining an atheist community varied, and a few interviewees questioned what such a group would do or have in common besides a lack of belief in a god, but no one rejected the concept of an atheist community altogether. Some of the interviewees said that the idea of joining such a group simply had never occurred to them; others had explored the idea but came to realize that an atheist community was not a good fit for them; and others had enough going on with their lives to fill up their time, from hobbies to family matters.

As noted in the introduction to this chapter, Cimino and Smith explore the topic of motivation for belonging to an atheist group in their analysis of the strategies employed by atheist and secular humanist groups, as well as their ‘rituals’. Of the three reasons suggested by Cimino and Smith as to why American atheists and secular humanists join atheist or secular groups (they want to counter their negative minority status, they find positive identities together in numbers, and they are concerned about the religious right), none can be considered principle reasons from my sample as for why those I interviewed joined the ACUO. The notion that atheists were concerned with being of minority status and treated unequally in society simply was not raised as an issue. While members of the ACUO may very well have felt more positive about the atheistic aspects of their identities from getting together with like-minded people, it was the social aspects (friendships, conversations) that came to the forefront in my interviews,

³⁹⁷ See Appendix XII for a table that features select quotations derived from the NGAA responses to the two above noted questions which inform this section.

and no one mentioned the ACUO as contributing to greater self-esteem or any such related notion. Concern about the religious right, or religion in general, did come up, usually in terms of criticism of religion in public spaces and often referring to the US rather than Canada, but did not present itself as a main reason why members joined the group.

When looking a bit more closely at the religious culture of the US it becomes clear why the reasons may be different, at least with regard to my ACUO sample in comparison with that of Cimino and Smith. They mention, for example, that at a major rally which took place in 2002, the Godless Americans March on Washington, was organized so as to “press for non-discrimination and equal rights for nonbelievers in America.”³⁹⁸ They explain:

The fact that atheists by law cannot be elected to public office in several states and by public opinion could not be elected to the presidency of the United States was the primary sign of such discrimination to the participants at the march.³⁹⁹

Being legally denied the ability to run for office, and being culturally mistrusted to the point where being elected President seems a practical impossibility are certainly pressing concerns, and helps to explain the reasons an atheist may join an atheist community in the US. I am unable to think of a Canadian equivalent of such a rally for atheist rights. Cimino and Smith found that “local atheist and secular humanist meetings” were one of the “few venues in which freethinkers can vent their frustrations and sense of alienation from society for their controversial beliefs.”⁴⁰⁰ Again, to think of Canadian atheists feeling alienated from Canadian society as a whole simply because they do not believe in God does not come intuitively. Individual cases of discrimination against atheists, as with any group, is a likely probability, but society as an overarching whole is quite a different case. There are certainly concerns, such as publicly-funded faith schools like the Catholic school system in Ontario, and the reposition of Catholicism as traditional and

³⁹⁸ Cimino and Smith, 419.

³⁹⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 420.

cultural in Quebec (by default painting atheists as anti-Quebec culture, see Chapter 2 section 2.2.4.2.3) is another, but atheists are free to run for office in Canada, and displaying overt religiosity could be seen as a negative trait for those in the running for Prime Minister (see Chapter 2 section 2.2.1).

Spencer Culham Bullivant has also written about the motivations behind joining an atheist community in the US. Bullivant interviewed members of Camp Quest Montana, a non-religious summer camp for families. He found that:

by utilizing a discourse that hinges on belief, the families at Camp Quest Montana are engaging in a complex process of identity formation that places them within American society while simultaneously distancing themselves from one of that society's assumed prerequisites: religious belief. They are struggling to express their sense of belonging to that America while rejecting, not the existence of religion per se, but the necessity of religious belief for that belonging to be recognized, thus creating an elastic space for non-religious belief as well as acceptance into and from the larger religious American society.⁴⁰¹

The organizers of Camp Quest were motivated to create the new camp because they had previously had a “somewhat negative experience” at a different nonreligious camp which was organized by the Center for Inquiry:

The organizers felt that Camp Inquiry, with its aggressive emphasis on intensive and unrelenting *doubt*, offered little for the children that was positive and relevant to the lives of an average non-religious youth in the United States. They left Camp Inquiry feeling that it had stripped their children down to hollow shells saying that they felt the children left Camp Inquiry with the mentality of “not believing in anything.” Instead of this feeling of emptiness, the parents and organizers of Camp Quest Montana hoped to expose their children to ways that they could communicate a belief in something without the negative relationship with religion.⁴⁰²

Camp Quest Montana was a place where children and adults could meet other non-religious people and “determine for themselves what it is they believe in a nurturing and open environment”, where they were encouraged to feel comfortable and confident talking about their beliefs.”⁴⁰³ They felt the need for this retreat from American society because they believed that

⁴⁰¹ Spencer Culham Bullivant, “Believing to Belong: Non-religious Belief as a Path to Inclusion,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 101-115, 101.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁰³ *Ibid.*, 108.

“their nonreligious identity was causing them to be excluded from the larger American identity.”⁴⁰⁴ Bullivant’s interviewees thus came to join Camp Quest because of a sense of alienation from religious America, and they desired the formation of positive nonreligious identities which spoke to what they did believe rather than what they did not believe. They also wanted to learn ways to integrate their nonreligious identities into American society. Their motivations are quite different than the motivations behind the ACUO interviewees.

While meeting like-minded people certainly re-enforces the notion that nonbelief can be normative, the ACUO members did not stress a need to construct their identities in order to integrate into Canadian society or develop a more Canadian identity. Some may have felt that Canada is too religious in certain areas, but they did not speak of atheism as being a barrier to integration in Canada. Moreover, the overwhelming majority of interviewees from both the ACUO and NGAA expressed that they would not send their children (if they were to have children) to an atheist summer camp, concerned that it may be “indoctrinating.” This was a follow-up to the question, “If you have children would you raise them to self-identify as atheists?” for which most interviewees from both groups responded that they would raise their children to be critical thinkers and hope they would come to atheism on their own accord. I then asked if they would send their child to an atheist summer camp, which I defined as a camp that had summer activities like canoeing and swimming but also taught children terms like ‘secularism’ and how to best conduct an argument with religious people. This question suggests a rather polemic camp quite unlike Camp Quest Montana, but similar to Camp Inquiry, based on a short *CBC* documentary on atheism which featured Camp Quest Niagara Falls Canada.⁴⁰⁵ I also mentioned that by “send” I meant of their (the parent’s) urging, not because their child

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., 109.

⁴⁰⁵ Clifton Joseph, “The Atheists Spreading the Word,” *CBC, The National*, October 5, 2007.

inquired and asked to go. With only three exceptions out of the forty interviews everyone was skeptical of the need for such a camp and most felt that, while it might be fun, it sounded too much like indoctrination to sit well with them.⁴⁰⁶ This is not surprising for the NGAA, since they themselves do not belong to any atheist communities, but it is a significant finding for the ACUO interviewees, since one would expect that if they find value in gathering with atheists they would want their (potential) children to have similar experiences. Moreover, if they felt that being an atheist is alienating from a society with a ‘will to religion’, one would assume they would also feel that nonreligious children experience exclusion, and may see an atheist camp as a tool for fostering a sense of belonging and learning how to navigate and even defend an atheist identity. Since the reverse was the case – the camps were not seen as needed – the members of the ACUO seem to feel that atheism does not necessarily foster exclusion from society, at least not in any overly concerning way, and this is supported by the fact that none of the ACUO interviewees mentioned feeling excluded from society as a reason for joining an atheist community. It appears then that these atheists feel relatively equal; they certainly do not express concern about their plight amongst a diverse array of religious groups and individuals in Canada.

In her study of non-religious meet-up groups in London, England, Lorna Mumford found that those she interviewed often concealed their atheism because British society and politics endorse “a perception of religious affiliation as normative,”⁴⁰⁷ by default painting atheists as abnormal or non-British. Many of those who came to publicly assert their non-religious views often did so as a result of having gone through “an emotional response to personal or public

⁴⁰⁶ Three interviewees would consider sending their children to such a camp, 26 would not consider it, and 11 gave answers that did not directly answer the question, such as James (5.3.1) who responded, “Atheism is a small part of who I am.”

⁴⁰⁷ Lorna Mumford, “Living Non-religious,” 166.

events,”⁴⁰⁸ such as a personal incident of discrimination or a religious transgression against society or societies in general. Mumford explains that the, at least perceived, “transgression” of secular “sacred values” by religion in public

is often experienced as an emotional response such as anger, outrage or despair, invoking a desire for action or retribution; exemplified by those of my participants who spoke of their emotional response to terror attacks, wars or instances of discrimination or persecution as motivating their decision to assert their non-religious stance and to join a non-religious group.⁴⁰⁹

Here Mumford has identified an emotional response to religion playing a key role in motivating some of her interviewees to become active in nonreligious communities. While emotion did occasionally come out in my interviews, it would be an exaggeration to state that emotion came across as a main motivating reason for why members of the ACUO joined that community. Personal life histories occasionally included tension with families, and perceived religious transgressions were noted, but they did not come across as emotionally-charged reasons for why the interviewees joined the club. Instead, those moments often came up (and across) as matter-of-fact details about their lives or global affairs, but not as driving forces behind seeking out and joining an atheist community. The reasons they often gave were to socialize with like-minded people in a place that was safe from offending others, not of an emotional desire to push-back against a society that endorses “a perception of religious affiliation as normative.”

6.4 Conclusion

Unlike what Cimino and Smith found through their research on American atheist and secular humanist groups, the members of the ACUO that I interviewed did *not* join because of a desire to counter their negative minority status, develop more positive atheist identities, or a deep concern with the religious right. Nor did they feel a need to retreat from a society with a

⁴⁰⁸ Ibid., 165.

⁴⁰⁹ Ibid., 166.

normative religiosity, as Bullivant found through his research on an American atheist summer camp. Likewise, Mumford's emphasis on the role of emotion does not find parallels with the ACUO as a whole. Each of these propositions may have been minor factors, but no interviewee mentioned being seriously concerned with being of unequal minority status in Canada, nor did any forward any deep-seated emotional reasons for seeking out an atheist community. Instead it was the social aspects of the club they found intriguing; most simply wanted to meet like-minded people in a safe-place where they could engage in conversations without dealing with the potential burden of offending those with whom they are conversing. On the other hand, the majority of NGAA interviewees do not belong to any active atheist communities that meet in person because they simply felt no need for one. Some had considered joining such a group while most had not, but overall atheism was not an aspect of their identity that the majority of interviewees felt called for group solidarity, nor did they express a deep desire to meet other atheists. This could be because they already had friends ('like-minded' or otherwise) with whom they could converse 'safely' (i.e. without being concerned about causing offense); that they felt no need to 'push-back' against (or even just discuss) religion in Canada; that being an atheist was not that important of an identity trait to them; or a variety of these reasons.

The main difference between those who joined the ACUO and the NGAA is that members of the ACUO often had a desire to meet other atheists whereas the NGAA overwhelmingly did not express a similar desire. The main factor here may be age in combination with the isolation one can feel when beginning a new chapter in life, in this case moving to a new city for university, although there were too many exceptions to this hypothesis to consider it over-arching. Another factor may be in how engaged atheists are with how atheism is portrayed in the Canadian media or understood by the Canadian public. The next

chapter explores this topic and analyses how interviewees from both groups understand the public discourse about atheism.

Chapter Seven: Atheism in Canada: Perceptions of the Public and the Media

I can't really remember the last time that it was an issue in the media, atheism. I think maybe it's like part of Canadian politeness. We just don't talk about it.

– Gerard, 26, social worker

I think people are generally aware of the basic ideas of atheism, um, but I don't think it is as defined, not as it needs to be, but we just tend to not define it because it's almost just a part of the life now, you know, atheists exist, we are out there you know, everyone knows one so there is not that same self-definition that's needed.

– Natalie, 29 graduate student in History

In September 2013, the nation was debating the Quebec government's proposed charter of values, which would have limited the wearing of some religious symbols for state employees. During this time *Toronto Star* reporter Heather Mallick wrote an article in which she argued, as an atheist, against the charter: "I deplore the Quebec rules even more than I deplore religious belief. They are a cue for religious and racial prejudice and the fact that they are superficially rational makes them worse."⁴¹⁰ In the article she also provided her opinion of atheism:

We are not glamorous, we non-believers. We have neither gilded domes nor synagogues nor those other things the Swiss banned, um, minarets. Such is my lack of interest in religion that I had to Google all three nouns in the last sentence.

We atheists/humanists may occasionally meet in little groups for a chat but we don't get the tax breaks that churches do. [...] We have no special clothing or jewelry, no outer signs that we place our faith not in an imaginary deity but in the decency and courage of our fellow humans.

You will notice us only by our courteous silence, fuelled by the notion that it seems odd to speak publicly about the baseline of normality, so we speak into a mirror. Well, the mirror has crack'd, people, and we atheists are speaking up.

We approve of freedom of religion. But we atheists have a right to be free from religion.

⁴¹⁰ Heather Mallick, "Quebec charter: An atheist speaks up: Atheists should speak up on the Quebec ban on religious symbols," *The Toronto Star*, http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/2013/09/13/quebec_charter_an_atheist_speaks_up.html, September 13, 2013, accessed September 13, 2013.

Our atheist/humanist beliefs should be respected as much as any other group's. It is one of the great glories of Canadian life.⁴¹¹

Mallick also mentioned that atheists are “without a leader.”⁴¹² Her take on atheism is interesting, as it speaks to her experiences as an atheist, but it also raises an interesting question: Mallick mentions that atheists “have a right to be free from religion,” and that “atheist/humanist beliefs should be respected as much as any other group's” beliefs, but she does not state whether or not she feels they presently are respected, or to what degree. Atheist organizations have also been vocal against the Quebec charter of values, (which was never enacted following a change in government), just as they are also vocal about other church-state issues, but do individual atheists feel that atheism *is* respected in Canada, or just that it *should* be respected?

Legally speaking, Mallick is correct that atheists have a right to freedom from religion. In *R. v. Big M Drug Mart Ltd.* (1985), which dealt with the legality of the Lord's Day Act (the ban on Sunday shopping), the Supreme Court wrote that atheists were included under section 2.(a) of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which guarantees freedom of conscience and beliefs. Here are three excerpts from that case which demonstrate how section 2.(a) applies just as equally to atheists as it does to religious adherents:

An accused atheist would be equally entitled to resist a charge under the Act. The only way this question might be relevant would be if s. 2 (a) were interpreted as limited to protecting only those persons who could prove a genuinely held religious belief. I can see no basis to so limit the breadth of s. 2 (a) in this case.⁴¹³

[...]

A law which itself infringes religious freedom is, by that reason alone, inconsistent with s. 2 (a) of the *Charter* and it matters not whether the accused is a Christian, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, agnostic or whether an individual or a corporation. It is the nature of the law, not the status of the accused, that is in issue.⁴¹⁴

[...]

Religious belief and practice are historically prototypical and, in many ways, paradigmatic of conscientiously-held beliefs and manifestations and are therefore protected by the *Charter*. Equally

⁴¹¹ Ibid.

⁴¹² Ibid.

⁴¹³ *R. v. Big M Drug Mart Ltd.*, Supreme Court of Canada, April 24, 1985, Paragraph [40].

⁴¹⁴ Ibid., Paragraph [41], emphasis in original.

protected, and for the same reasons, are expressions and manifestations of religious non-belief and refusals to participate in religious practice.”⁴¹⁵

In light of this equally legally protected constitutional right to freedom of conscience and religion, how do atheists feel about the plight of atheism in Canada? We know that some atheists have been involved in legal cases (see Chapter 2 section 2.2.4), but how engaged with, (or even aware of), are most atheists with matters pertaining to atheism in Canada? This chapter examines how members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) and non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA) perceive atheism in Canada by asking them how they think atheism is perceived by others. The main interview question behind this section’s theme is, “Do you think atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?”, although excerpts from responses to other questions are included when informative.

7.1 Perceptions of the Public and the Media: ACUO

As a scholar of atheism I have taken notice of incidents of atheism in the press (see Chapter 2 section 2.2.5). Being familiar with some of the national debates in this area, I assumed most of the members of the ACUO, especially those committed enough to organize or attend events, would also be familiar with the national discourse, or rather, national discourses, on atheism when they do arise. Through my interviews I realized this simply was not the case. When I raised the topic of how well atheism is understood by the public and the media in Canada, I was often met with a moment of silence, followed by uncertainty. Some interviewees took it as an opportunity to discuss religion and/or atheism in the United States, and a few attributed what they thought of as a lack of Canadian discourse in this area to the popular caricature of Canadians as polite and inclined to avoid controversy. To exemplify how ACUO-

⁴¹⁵ Ibid., Paragraph [123], emphasis in original.

member interviewees felt atheism is understood by the public and/or the media in Canada, we now turn to Gerard, Heather, Edward, and Alison for their opinions.

7.1.1 Gerard

Gerard grew up in a small Northern Ontario town. He moved to Ottawa in 2006 to attend university. At the time of our interview he was a 26 year-old social worker, but he was an undergraduate Sociology student while the ACUO was active. He describes the community in which he was raised as a “small town of eight or nine-hundred people” which was “very religious.” His parents were not religious, and “never really went to church,” but at an early age he began attending an Anglican church with his great aunt. He was confirmed in that church, but his churchgoing and belief in Jesus created some tension between him and his father: “I think he kind of saw me as one of these kind of, like, brainwashed church, like kind of like Jesus freaky people and he wasn’t one really, and you know, our relationship is probably quite a bit better now. If I was still really religious I think we would have a lot harder time getting along.” He began doubting God’s existence and thus his religion’s truth claims when he was in early high school, although he still chose to get confirmed. By grade nine he became a non-believer, which coincided with his desire to socialize: “[O]nce you get to high school there is a lot of things going on, in terms of like partying for the first time, drinking, and there is girls and like you want to have a lot of fun and the religious views kind of conflict with that so I think I kind of threw that out in order to kind of go down the hedonistic path.” He joined the ACUO because a roommate of his at the time was a member; to Gerard “it was something that just seemed to be missing from the landscape of clubs at the U of Ottawa.” At present his close friends happen to be atheists although he still gets along with people who have religious faith.

When I asked Gerard to speculate on generational differences between atheists (“Is there a change in how atheists of younger generations approach or frame atheism compared to atheists of older generations?”), he answered with regard to his theory of how dwindling church attendance relates to the public acceptability of atheism:

Yeah, I think so! I think it was; it was more taboo in the older generation. A lot of people who don't practice or wouldn't be so, 'quote unquote', “devout Christians” or whatever, still you know every Sunday they would go to church. [...] I think that, that's the older generation, that's the way that it is done, you know, you just... maybe even more American but even Canadian too, right? You just go to church every Sunday and that's part of your life and I think that the younger generation that's kind of, that's really disappearing you know. [...] It just seems like nowadays it's more open. You are allowed to, in like Canadian society at least be kind of allowed to say, “yeah, well, I am not religious,” and people don't really go “OMG!” in the way they maybe would, I don't know, like the 1940's/50's. It's hard to say why it is disappearing. [...] I think in the States its still, there is more stigma attached to it but in Canada it's not really stigmatized at all. So, most of the time I just assume that people, whether or not they identify themselves as Christian, if you had to identify yourself as Christian but you are not practicing for all intents and purposes, [you are] probably more an atheist than you actually think you are. So, I think this is maybe part of it becoming more, a more normal part of everyday life.

Although Gerard considers ‘the’ stigma against atheists to be in retreat, he still acknowledges that atheism is misunderstood at times, although less-so by younger generations than older generations (both left undefined), and less-so in Canada than in the United States. When asked if he thinks atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada, Gerard replied:

I don't think it is at all, really. I think there is, even though it is becoming more normal, it's still kind of misunderstood when you articulate and put a label on it. It brings with it a lot of the stuff, maybe from the past in misconceptions and people saying, you know, like, well, “Stalin was an atheist and so was Hitler,” and even if, you know, that person is for all intents and purposes not very active in the church, but is just somebody who's like one of these people who goes on Sunday and does lip-service and then acts like an atheist indistinguishable except for that one thing. They will say, “OMG, I am not an atheist,” because even if they don't go to church, “I am not an atheist because atheists are bad people.” I think that that is, you know, like the older generation is still the ones who are writing the columns and the media and all of that sort of stuff is still kind of like that generation. So I think that it is a little bit more misunderstood by the older generation but it's getting better, because there is more openness, there is more exchange of information and people are able to, you know, just the internet being around since I was younger you know [...] I can't really remember the last time that it was an issue in the media, atheism. I think maybe it's like part of Canadian politeness. We just don't talk about it. It is one of those; politics and religion – you don't talk about it at the dinner table – and media usually doesn't come up a lot. I can't really think of a time.

While Gerard believes ‘the’ stigma against atheists is disappearing, but that there still remains a stigma, in part at least due to a generational gap, he later explained what he thinks that

stigma is: “[For some people y]ou are not attacking Christianity generally, you’re attacking ‘me’ and that’s, eh, people feel like, feel uncomfortable with atheism.” He attributes this to the atheist “banner men who kind of embody the idea of attacking people, attacking faith [...] people like that are the people who are producing or perpetuating the negative reaction that you get when you describe yourself as an atheist.”

Gerard raises a number of interesting points related to receiving a negative reaction or response because one is an atheist. He mentions the notion that religion does not come up very often in polite company – a Canadian caricature that was also raised by a few other interviewees. He seems uncertain about the media – Gerard cannot remember a time when atheism was an issue in Canada, at least one covered by the media in Canada. In this latter quote it is quite interesting that Gerard seems to empathize with those who may have a negative reaction or response to atheism; he is seeking to remain non-judgemental while explaining why some people might view atheism negatively. In fact, he puts some of the blame on other atheists, those who aggressively attack faith. This points to an awareness of a disconnect between how atheism and religion are often conceptualized: to an atheist, atheism and religions are ‘ideas’ – perhaps even ideologies – but to a religious person atheism and religion may be considered ‘personal’. This concept, and this non-judgemental awareness of how religious people may understand atheism, also came out in other interviews.

7.1.2 Heather

Heather is a 22 year-old Master’s student in Classics. She has lived in Ottawa for four or five years; prior to that she lived in a small Ontario town bordering Quebec where she grew up and which she continues to visit during the summers. As was common in that community, she

attended Catholic school. Besides school-related and Easter and Christmas services she did not attend church, as her “parents were not particularly religious,” although she does suppose that her family was culturally Catholic. Although she “never believed” in God she started “thinking about it” when she was around 16/17 years-old. She identified as agnostic before identifying as atheist.

Heather joined the ACUO to meet other atheists. She sees the club as “a place where people can escape and say what they want to say about religion without anyone getting offended because they know everyone sort of has the same ideas and no one is going to be like, ‘you can’t say that about religion, you’re going to offend someone.’ It is sort of a stress free environment to, like, rant about what you don’t like about religion”. When asked if she thinks atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada, Heather replied:

Understood? Um, I don’t know, like, in my experience it’s sort of always been seen as like a phase or something, like, “oh.” That is how I feel my parents see it, and it is like, “a phase I am going through.” When I get older I will “magically become religious.” So I feel whenever I have said it to anyone that I am an atheist it is like, some of my family anyways, they always act like, “oh, whatever, but you’re going to eventually grow out of it.” So, I don’t know if it’s like that or... but I don’t know for the public. I haven’t seen big negative things about atheism, because I feel like the government here is pretty neutral about religion compared to the US where, you know, like what sect and all that the President is part of, and you have to know that he goes to church on... I don’t care if he goes to church. I don’t know if anyone actually cares where they go to church or what they believe; so I don’t know.

It is also worth noting that Heather does not feel the need to hide the fact that she is an atheist when she is asked about her religiosity (note: the tattoo she mentions has an anti-religion message and was a Christmas present from her mother, whose main concern was simply that it would be “easy to cover up in the future” after she goes through her atheist “phase”):

What do you tell people when they ask what your religious beliefs are or what your religion is?

I say I’m an atheist. I’m not scared to say it. I guess because I have never had a negative reaction. Because in general I haven’t even, like, I guess maybe it is the people I meet. I don’t go out of my way to meet super religious people I guess, that would get angry about it.

Have you ever downplayed it?

Maybe. I don’t know; I don’t go out of my way to say it. Like my... For example, my roommate right now, I know she is a Catholic. I know it is pretty important to her family. I don’t think I have ever actually mentioned I’m an atheist but whenever we talk about religion I’m just sort of like, I don’t say anything, you know, I just... or when I told her I had a tattoo I just didn’t say what it was. I just like, I am not going to mention it, but I think she probably guessed, but um... she has this lovely poster on our fridge which says

um, well, what is it again, um, “Magic won’t happen if you don’t believe in it” or something like that, like you sort of like you have to believe for magic to happen. It’s not really religious but it sort of has that idea, right? If you don’t have faith nothing is going to happen, and I stare at it all the time and I am like, “ha,ha,ha,” but yeah, no. I guess I would say I downplay it but only because I’m not very good with confrontation and so I avoid it. Other people I would say don’t downplay it at all because they love confrontation. They want to fight about it and I am more like, I am just not going to offend anyone.

In these short exchanges Heather touches upon a few interesting things. Firstly, she began her answer to the question “Do you think that atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?, with uncertainty. This is a common response, which in turn points to a lack of public debate around atheism in Canada, at least from the interviewee’s perspective. Secondly, she clearly does not see the religiosity of elected officials – politicians – as being of much relevance in Canada. Thirdly, she mentions how she ‘deals’ with the religious friends in her life, through the example of her roommate: it seems clear that she does not wish to ostracize believers from her life or ‘de-convert’ them to atheism.

7.1.3 Edward

Edward is a 30 year-old PhD Candidate with an interest in international relations and historical imperialism. He has lived in Ottawa “pretty much” all of his life. He describes himself as an atheist and offers three tenets of atheism (the numbers have been added):

- 1) “you don’t believe in God or some sort of supernatural power, instead you believe that human beings shape their own destiny”;
- 2) “an atheist also believes in the division between church and state, or church or mosque and state or synagogue and state, and the reason why they believe that is because they believe that the state’s law is not to enforce morality and enforce morality on others, but instead the state’s role is to protect everybody’s rights regardless of whether they are religious or not religious”; and,

3) “the source of morality is human reason.”

Edward’s father grew up in a Southern European country and attended a strict Catholic boarding school. By the time he left that school he had abandoned Catholicism and become “quite anti-religious” toward the general idea of religion, but not to “the people who believe in a particular religious faith.” His mother is also an atheist, having been since her childhood, and Edward has identified as an atheist since he was 8 or 9 years-old. One of his earlier experiences with religion was being read stories from the Bible by his grandmother from his mother’s side, but he felt uncomfortable with the moral ambiguity of stories such as Abraham and the sacrifice of Isaac. When he was 13 or 14 years-old he went through a religious phase brought on as a result of “insecurity, depression” and the inability to find “solace in the company of friends, or even within family.” During this short phase he did not attend any organized religious services but he did consider God to be on his side, even though he still found it difficult to fully believe in God “because there wasn’t anything concrete to actually back up that conviction.” When he received a D on a science midterm examination he abandoned trying to believe in God: “I realized that believing in God does not lead to a reward in the end.” He compares his religious phase to trying to prove that communism works, explaining that, “you can’t really do it.”⁴¹⁶

During our interview Edward raised a few points which were commonly raised by other interviewees. He explained that he does not believe atheism is discussed often in the media, and he considers the reason atheism may be controversial is that religious people take it personally:

Do you think that atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?
 Actually, I don’t remember the Canadian media talking about atheism that much. I think, ah, and also the Canadian public doesn’t talk about atheism that much because it’s one of these controversial subjects, so I guess they don’t understand it as well as they could understand it.

⁴¹⁶ This biography (from “Edward is a 30 year-old” to “you can’t really do it”) was originally published in Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 117-136, 125-126.

S: Why would, you think, atheism would be a controversial subject?

Well, because sometimes there's religious people in your circle, and if you say that God doesn't exist and if you go into why atheism is more logical than, um, Islam or Christianity, then chances are, ah, the people, the religious people, take it personally, because the problem that I find many religious people have is that they fail to make a distinction, which is a distinction between your beliefs and your own person. They tend to conflate the two things. So, if you attack, if you try to discredit Christianity, they see that as a personal attack. I had that experience a few times with other Christians.

With other Christians?

Yeah. Sometimes I have to remind them: these are just beliefs. And beliefs – regardless of what these beliefs are – they are subject to critical analysis. And this isn't about you – it's about beliefs. This is a debate about ideas. And I think even people who are not religious are like that. There are historians, I'm not mentioning any names, who believe that their interpretation of a certain major event is accurate, and if you dispute that they see that as a personal attack because their life is all about developing that particular interpretation, so if you discredit their life's work they see that as a refutation of them.

S: Yeah.

So, I think that's why atheism doesn't get talked about, and also why politics, err, controversial subjects, don't get talked about that much. And of course there's an understood notion in Canadian society that if you want to have a date and you want the date to go well there are certain subjects that you must never discuss, you must never discuss religion, you must never discuss politics, and you must never discuss other deep controversial issues. If you avoid all that you will have several dates, you will eventually get laid, and all will go well in your life. [Laughter]

Although Edward acknowledges that religion is a controversial subject, he nonetheless believes it is important to discuss and debate that topic with his friends who hold different religious beliefs, even if it is considered an “antisocial thing to do.” Edward explained that he enjoys debating with his friends because “if I can be absolutely solid in my agreement then I can really believe in what I believe, but in order to be really solid you have to look at alternative points of view.”

Edward is of the opinion that atheism is a controversial subject in Canada. The controversy, from Edward's perspective, is that for some people atheism is considered a personal attack against their faith, and Canadians avoid discussing controversial subjects such as politics and religion as an unspoken rule of proper social etiquette. This is similar to the comment made above by Gerald regarding the notion that religion does not often come up in polite conversation in Canada, and by extension, atheism is not often discussed.

7.1.4 Alison

Alison is a 26 year-old undergraduate student studying Sociology. She grew up in a large city in Quebec before moving to Ottawa thirteen years ago. Her family's religious background includes the influence of Eastern European orthodox Christianity and French Catholicism; she experienced religious services and customs when visiting religious relatives in the country of her ethnic background, and in Canada she went to a private Catholic school, but she was not an avid churchgoer. She later discovered that her parents were atheists after she asked them when she was about 20 years-old. As a child, due in large part to influence from her school, she believed in God, but following the realization that her prayers to God were in vain she stopped believing in God in grade three. Although she stopped believing as a child, Alison did not identify with – nor was aware of – the term 'atheist' until she was 19 when she and her boyfriend were discussing religion. She joined the ACUO primarily because of her boyfriend's involvement with the club, not because she was seeking an atheist community to join: "I was just always happy not believing in God. I didn't have anything to prove to anyone or anything. I wasn't looking for anything. I found something, some great things, but yeah." Although she did not seek it out she did enjoy socializing and learning more about atheism through the club, (such as who the New Atheists are), although she was also critical of some aspects of it, such as the aggression exhibited by some members during Reason Week, and how the club did not do more to seek outside affiliations or bring in guest speakers, instead acting principally as a social group for people who were "misunderstood" and "needed to be social with others."

Although Alison sees religion "everywhere," she nonetheless does not consider it to be of any major concern: "[W]e're a pretty secular country I think. You choose to go to Christian

school or public school, right, so. You know, you have choices. I don't think religion is really forced onto you in Canada, so you kind of have a, you know, the opportunity to choose. It is not that bad but you still see it absolutely everywhere you go." Nor does she identify with New Atheism, finding it to be too aggressive: "You can't just attack these people with their beliefs and their way of life. It's like, it's, it's too much, you know? You can only educate but you know, to not force atheism down people's throats, and that's what I think a lot of them do." These notions, that religion in Canada is visible but not overtly concerning, and that there is no need to be aggressive toward religion or religious people, also came out when I asked Alison if she thinks that atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada:

I think yes. I think yes, I think, this... for some reason we are all joking about eating fetuses and stuff and I never understood, and then, why are people joking about eating fetuses? What does that have to do with anything?

You mean like on Facebook or?

Yeah, yeah, apparently this is something that people think about atheists but I have never come across it.

Oh, you mean what people say about atheists? Okay. I thought you were telling me someone on Facebook was making a joke about eating fetuses, and I was like, "who is doing this?"

No, no, no, someone from the group made a joke about how come here with us we don't eat fetuses you know, and apparently I think um, yeah, I don't think atheists are really, are really being viewed that badly. I mean if anything Muslims are the ones who are getting all the bad rap you know and then you have, well I mean Christians never really do get that because they control the media, but um.

Christians control the media?

Well *Fox News*.

Oh, okay.

Um no, they will just bash it, um, yeah, so I've, I don't know, I have never really... I have never been treated differently because I am an atheist. I mean, okay, fine, with my family from [Eastern Europe], like, I'm an atheist. They're like, "you poor thing, come here, let's put you back into shape," you know? Um, and I went to South America once and um, I get [to meet my boyfriend's family] and they are all hardcore religious. Like *Hard Core*. Like hard core and they, just – he started arguing with them and I am going, "holy crap, shut up man, this is your family! Enjoy them while you are [visiting] for the next three days as opposed to arguing religion with them," right? So, for sure some people are kind of like, "oh, really, you are an atheist?" Like, "you poor thing, let's put you back on the right path," but I don't think atheists really get that. But a bad rap? They probably do from Christian groups and stuff like that, well, "you're an atheist and you don't have morals," and stuff like that, but it's more, just, I don't know, not in Canada. Not in Canada because we have a, well, not anymore, but we used to have a secular government when it wasn't Conservative, but um, yeah. I think atheists are generally seen as rational educated people now. So it is hard to be a, um, 'ignorant criminal bad atheist' I think. That is not something that would just pop up, like if you are reading um, a news article and some guy murdered his wife by pouring boiling water on her or whatever he did to her, right? It doesn't say, like, "and he is an atheist," right? But, then if you are looking at, I don't know, like if, um, I am trying to think, I don't really see murders who... well, of course, the fundamental Muslims, but. Yeah, you get more bad raps about other religions who are extremists and obviously...

Interesting.

...that is just my personal, because I know a lot of people, “oh yeah, atheists are viewed this, and this, and they are freaking out about them,” that’s because you concern yourself with all of these people, who view you negatively, but in general there’s is no issue I think, in Canada. That’s just me.

Alison is of the opinion that atheists in general are seen as “rational educated people.”

She seems to get along well with those who are religious even when they are aware of her being an atheist, although she does acknowledge that she will at least occasionally avoid speaking about God when it causes another person unease. Moreover, she considers Muslims to have a worse stigma in society than atheists, as evident from her comparison of how she believes the media would treat a news story featuring a Muslim committing a murder as opposed to an atheist committing a murder. She is clearly not concerned with the plight of atheists in Canadian society, at least in Ottawa where she believes a lot of people are not religious.

7.2 Perceptions of the Public and the Media: NGAA

As with the ACUO interviewees, the majority of NGAA interviewees felt that the public and or/media do not understand atheism, and there is a sense of uncertainty that permeates many of the answers, as well as a sense that the status of atheism is nothing to be overly concerned about in Canada. To exemplify how NGAA interviewees felt atheism is understood by the public and/or the media in Canada, we now turn to Brian, Warren, Natalie, and Cody for their opinions.

7.2.1 Brian

Brian is 52 years-old and self-employed with a successful business. He has lived in Southern Ontario and the East Coast and has resided in Ottawa for nineteen years. Although he identifies as an atheist, lately he has been describing himself as a humanist because he feels it

denotes values whereas atheism “doesn’t really tell much about that person other than that they have decided to reject” all “religious dogma.”

Brian’s parents were both non-practicing Anglicans so he did not have any “religious immersion” as a child. He explains that “religion did not play a big role in [his] life growing up,” and that he “never really did believe in God,” although around grades six and seven he did have two close friends who were quite religious. It was through conversing with one of these friends that he came to openly reject belief in God: “I remember concluding as a result of that process, that I didn’t believe in God, but mostly what I concluded was ‘if that’s the God I am supposed to believe in I don’t want to believe in Him because I don’t think he is a nice God.’”

Today Brian’s mother goes to the United Church but he is “not sure” what his father believes. His wife “would be in some kind of agnostic camp, but she doesn’t believe in organized religion.” As a teenager his daughter, who had lots of Muslim friends at the time, “flirted with becoming a Muslim” as “a rebellion to George Bush” and “the way the west was reacting to what was going on,” (assumedly regarding responses to 9/11), but “she has since totally rejected it” and Brian “would say she is an atheist but she doesn’t really care about religion.”

Brian belongs to an online atheist community which provides him with the opportunity to get into deep conversations, although he does not attend live meetings because he is not “looking to fill a social void and I am not looking to fill a void that people who have come from a religious tradition, you know, are looking for.” He also expressed that he does not feel the need to partake in “some kind of Sunday atheist service and drink coffee afterwards.” When I asked Brian if he thinks that atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or media in Canada, he replied:

Like Michael Enright,⁴¹⁷ most recently? I think... and this is where I kind of have a dimension of reticence to the New Atheists is they have done kind of a great service to people who just couldn't get to atheism but wanted to because the, ah, you know, messages like that. The framework of understanding, like, that wasn't really available in polite circles before them, and so that helped people who were struggling with leaving their religion or coming to terms with religion that did a lot of good for them. I think there is some truth to the fact, to the accusation that if not in principle in style there is a dimension of their methods that is [as] obnoxious, as some of the, you know, fundamentalist Evangelicals, you know? Would I be interested in going to lectures with them? Yeah. Would I be interested in, you know, being friends with them? Maybe not! The New Atheists I am talking about.

Well, yeah, how do I – so you are framing the answer in terms of...

You remind me of the questions right?

Do you think atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?

Yeah, so I think the public and media is reacting really to the spokespersons for the atheist community which is kind of dominated by the celebrity atheists. CFI [Centre for Inquiry] has done a good job I think of being, in Canada anyway, and I don't see – even though it is very big in the US – I don't see them getting much in the way of a popular press there. It is more like Bill Maher⁴¹⁸ and, other than the New Atheists, it's like Bill Maher, or there are a few other sort of celebrity personalities that are open about their atheism. Their names escape me right now. So, I don't know, so I think religious people or people who don't think much about religion, they have heard of Richard Dawkins to a certain degree or heard of Harris or Hitchens and maybe what they have heard, both directly through their readings or what other people are saying, is, you know, kind of 'superior nasty guy' or something like that.

Brian framed his response in terms of how the public and the media understand atheism by pointing to the New Atheists: "I think the public and media is reacting really to the spokespersons for the atheist community which is kind of dominated by the celebrity atheists." He does not see this as necessarily a fault on the public or the medias behalf; in fact, he seems to place some of the blame on the New Atheists themselves. He sees the Centre for Inquiry as making some inroads, particularly in the United States, but for those who do not think about religion (and assumedly atheism) very much, it is often the names Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and/or Maher who come to mind, which assumedly taints the way they understand atheism.

7.2.2 Warren

Warren is 27 years of age and is the Executive Director of a business firm. He moved to Ottawa just over ten years ago, prior to that he lived in different Southern Ontario cities and

⁴¹⁷ As noted in Chapter 2 section 2.2.5.1, CBC Radio broadcaster Michael Enright wrote an essay, published by CBC Radio, entitled "Could Atheists Please Stop Complaining."

⁴¹⁸ Bill Maher is an American nonreligious personality, comic, and political satirist/commentator. He wrote and starred in *Religulous*, (Bill Maher and Larry Charles, Lionsgate, 2008), a religio-critical documentary.

Saskatchewan. He identifies as an atheist but also describes himself as a non-theist. Warren was raised in a “Christian household.” His family “jumped around” when it came to denominations, and he has spent time attending Anglican, Catholic, Pentecostal, Baptist, and Mormon services. He came to disbelieve religious claims when he “learned that there was an option” and was “old enough to really understand the implications.” This occurred when he was about 10 years-old: “I remember the moment that I told my parents that I wouldn’t be going to church with them anymore because ‘I just don’t feel that this has anything for me and I don’t believe,’ and they were always very supportive of that decision.” This followed with a point in his life when his “parents decided that they weren’t believing any kind of religious disposition” and he “came to the realization,” that religion “clearly isn’t a hard fast rule,” although at the specific time when he told his parents he would not be going to church anymore they had resumed attending church.

Today Warren considers himself “strongly ruled by logic,” and, interestingly, he is critical of New Atheism because he understands it as promoting “logic without tolerance” which is “an irrational reaction,” in this case to religion. When I asked him if he belonged to any atheist communities, Warren replied: “No, other than the general population!” When I asked him if he thinks there is a change in how atheists of younger generations approach or frame atheism compared to that of older generations, he answered in a way that relates to how he sees culture changing in Canada:

I believe so! [...T]he case may be purely anecdotal but I feel that historically, from when I was younger, you defined, you know, the default was, you know, you were either Christian in the areas where you grew up or you were the antitheist, and that was the other option, but I think increasingly as demographics and spiritual graphics switch – and again this just may be who I am associating with – the opposite is now the other right? So it is not really how you define yourself. It’s not a defined characteristic. It’s like saying I have a skin as opposed to the opposite.

Although I am uncertain of how the skin metaphor relates (I assume stating that one has skin is redundant, which is how he views stating that one is an atheist), here he seems to be stating that

whereas religion used to be the default today being an atheist is the default, at least in his social circles. When I asked Warren if he thinks atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or media in Canada, he answered:

I think that depends. ‘In Canada’ ... there is a really wide spectrum there right. I think that, again, in urban centres it is probably more understood and accepted by the media as well, but at the same time you will never see a politician – or let me say a successful politician – staunchly promoting their atheism. It is always one of those questions that you avoid because, you know, you do especially still, where some of the larger voting populations are, the demographics, it is and is not necessarily the norm. My demographic [does not] necessarily vote as much as we should. Unfortunately we don’t have much of a say, but overall I think that because Canada isn’t necessarily a homogenous place overall, religious acceptance is higher and that includes the decision not to have one.

Not to have a religion?

Yeah!

Warren’s response to the question of how the public and the media understand atheism is interesting in that he believes they understand it because “atheism is increasingly the norm,” at least with regard to urban areas like Ottawa. He believes Canada is a country where religious acceptance is high “and that includes the decision not to have” a religion. From Warren’s perspective there does not seem to be any concern with atheism being misunderstood, since atheism is increasingly becoming the norm in “the general population.”

7.2.3 Natalie

Natalie is a 29 year-old graduate student in History. She grew up in a small Southern Ontario town and has lived in Ottawa off and on for twelve years. Her father and brother are atheists and her mother is a non-practicing Catholic. She describes “most” of her friends as having “atheist tendencies but wouldn’t self-identify as atheists.” Natalie was baptized Catholic and took her First Communion but her mother “never forced her religion on” her or her family and Natalie chose not to get confirmed when she was in grade eight because she had “figured it out for” herself that she “wasn’t Catholic, and that was okay.” Natalie went to church weekly while she attended an elementary Catholic School, but she stopped going to church when she

switched to a public school after grade four. As a child she believed in God because she was “young and impressionable,” but she started to doubt Catholicism by grade eight. She describes her doubts at this time as a “seedling” and explains that her “atheism really sort of took off, I guess – or started to come to the surface – in the third year of University,” when she was around 20 years-old, and that reading Christopher Hitchens “sort of solidified” her atheism.

When I asked her if identifying with atheism changed or shifted her political, moral, or social policy views at all, she answered in a manner that led smoothly into the next question about how atheism in Canada is understood:

No, not at all; I have always been very left-wing, that hasn't really done anything. No. I think this is sort of maybe representative of a lot of atheists in Canada, but, you know, religion just doesn't play a factor whether they are religious or not. It is more of a social, you know, your social, financial, standing. So yeah, I think that's sort of where I fall.

Great! Well, that leads me in nicely to the next question. Do you think that atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?

To an extent; I think people are generally aware of the basic ideas of atheism, um, but I don't think it is as defined, not as it needs to be, but we just tend to not define it because it's almost just a part of life now, you know, atheists exist, we are out there, you know, everyone knows one so there is not that same self-definition that's needed. So yeah, you can speak of atheism as sort of this broad overarching term to having, to really deal with it, and I think maybe that I don't know if that is a bad thing or a good thing. It's just out there.

What do you mean ‘you don't know if it is a bad thing or a good thing’?

I don't know if people feel that we need to define atheism more or if it can just exist as this entity that you know, generally describes someone who is not a believer.

Oh I see – it's not like it needs an elaborate explanation.

Exactly, yeah, it's just, yeah! It just exists.

According to Natalie, religion is less a factor on where one stands on social, political, and moral issues than is one's social and financial standing. Moreover, she thinks people are “generally aware of the basics of atheism,” (which assumedly simply means “someone who is not a believer”), but it is not clearly defined because it is “almost just a part of life now.” Nor does she feel an urgent need for it to be defined in the public's consciousness, since “everyone knows one so there is not the same self-definition that is needed.” As with Warren, Natalie sees atheism as a part of her society and she does not seem concerned over how it is understood by the public or the media in Canada.

7.2.4 Cody

Cody is a 28 year-old employee of the Government of Canada as well as a part-time undergraduate student studying philosophy. He has lived in Ottawa for three years, before that he was born and raised in Manitoba. He identifies as an atheist although if he “had to pick one other” descriptor “it would be ‘skeptic’.”

Cody’s brother and sister are also atheists; he does not “know about” his father, and he thinks his mother “does believe in something but she is also very curious” and open-minded when it comes to discussing topics like the Big Bang and evolution. He describes his family as “fairly secular,” and although he and his siblings went to the United Church and Sunday school when they were younger, religion “wasn’t really forced down our throats, and my parents didn’t preach at home.” They went to church weekly until he was a teenager, at which point it was becoming “too much of a hassle” for his parents to get them “out of the house on Sunday morning,” since they found church annoying and “pretty bland.”

Although he does not recall ever believing in God, he assumes that when he was very young he would have believed “there was a heaven and that I would see relatives and that there’s a God and Jesus and all that stuff” in the same sense that he “believed in Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny,” all of which he eventually “grew out of.” He is “pretty sure” that by high school he “would have been a non-believer,” although he also explains that “identifying with the term atheist has definitely been a long journey.” It was not until he was in college, after he had “read Dawkins and Hitchens,” that he self-identified as an atheist. When I asked him if he thinks that atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or media in Canada, Cody explained:

I really don’t know, I mean, I want to say my default answer is “no” just because I think it is hard for the media to really cover any issue properly. There is always some bias, there is always some twist that the media puts on their stories and not necessarily intentionally [...] I think the reason I have such a hard time

with [this question] is because I don't necessarily see atheism being covered a lot, and I can't think of a time where I've seen an article on *CBC* [*Canadian Broadcast Corporation*] about atheism or some special report on atheism. Yeah, I don't really see that. You see it more in the States. You know, I see it more on *CNN*. They have a belief blog so there are some things in there on atheism. I can think of one example in the Canadian media. A, quite a few years ago now, I think when Richard Dawkins was still doing his tour with *The God Delusion*, he was interviewed on *CBC Sunday Morning*,⁴¹⁹ or whatever the show is. [...] I'm actually, I'm a fan of Evan Solomon but I was really disappointed when I saw that interview because [Dawkins] was trying to explain to them sort of his ideas as on what evolution would have to say about why we treat other human beings nice [...] And his explanation was, he tried to explain it from an evolutionary perspective that, you know, "well maybe it's sort of a misfiring," you know, and they just didn't buy it at all, you know, and when the interview ended the two [hosts] were sitting there laughing about it and I was kind of insulted. I was like, 'this man is an evolutionary biologist. He has studied this for years; he has dedicated his life to studying evolutionary biology. If you are going to ask anybody it's going to be this guy, and you are kind of just laughing his explanation away,' you know? And so to me that is definitely a sign that, you know, atheism could be misunderstood. I think it's hard for people to take humanism out of the equation. It is hard for people to look at it strictly from a scientific perspective. [...] I don't think that they could wrap their heads around the fact that us being nice was just a biological tendency, you know?

I asked Cody why he thinks the Canadian media does not report on atheism much, to which he replied:

Well, Canada is very much more of a secular state. Especially compared to the United States. However, recently you do have the issues in Quebec. With the Charter in Quebec.⁴²⁰ And again, that's not going to help the secular cause or the atheist cause. I mean, that's just, that's very draconian, and I don't agree with the approach that they are taking. [...] I think Canada overall is more of a secular society and we try to separate religion from politics and so, and I mean again you just see that in a comparison with countries like the United States, where they like to say that politics and religion are separate but religion very much plays a role, in their politics down there. You could not get elected as President if you did not believe in God. But, here it really doesn't come up. I really believe that you could have a Prime Minister, and maybe we have, who doesn't believe in God. Because religion just doesn't seem to be an issue, in politics here. It's an interesting question, 'why do we just not talk about it as much,' I am not sure. Canada is more liberal and more accepting of all cultures. Which, I mean, you know sometimes I have a problem with taking too liberal of an approach to religion. I think, again, we should question some things, but anyway...

Cody was unsure at first as to whether or not he had even seen atheism covered in Canada's state-funded news agency, the *Canadian Broadcasting Corporation* (*CBC*), but after a moment of reflection he recalled Richard Dawkins being interviewed by Evan Solomon. His impression of that interview was less than favourable toward the interviewer and his co-host, which led him to believe that atheism is misunderstood in the Canadian media. Cody also shared his opinion that Canada is "very much more of a secular state" than the United States. He

⁴¹⁹ Actually entitled *CBC News: Sunday* with Evan Solomon and Carole MacNeil.

⁴²⁰ The Quebec government's proposed charter of values, which would have limited public employees from wearing religious adherents from wearing certain religious symbols. It died with the arrival of a new government.

believes that Canadians “try to separate religion from politics” as compared, again, with the US, because “Canada is more liberal and more accepting of all cultures.” Cody thus does not see religion, and by extension, atheism, as being of much relevance or concern in Canada, at least when it comes to politics.

7.3 Discussion

The main question behind this chapter’s theme is: “Do you think atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?” In response to this question, five of the forty interviewees gave answers which either imply or state ‘yes’; twenty-two interviewees gave answers which either imply or state ‘no’; and thirteen interviewees gave answers that were less clear-cut and thus difficult to categorize.⁴²¹ There are no distinguishable differences between the ACUO and the NGAA interviewees when it comes to their perceptions of the public or the media’s understanding of atheism in Canada.

Table 8: The public and the media in Canada

Do you think that atheism is well understood by the public or the media in Canada?	Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO)	Non-Group Affiliated Atheists (NGAA)	All Interviewees (ACUO and NGAA)
Yes	3	2	5
No	10	12	22
Difficult to Categorize	7	6	13

⁴²¹ I categorized Sylvia, Andrew, Alison, Derrick, and Natalie under ‘yes’. I categorized James, Donovan, Brandon, Matthew, Belinda, Billy, Tonya, Colin, Gerard, Mike, Juliana, Tracy, Elissa, Hanna, Ken, Ian, Ashley, Jean, Kevin, Hayden, George, and Nick under ‘no’. I categorized Glen, Evelyn, Dan, Wade, Heather, Krista, Edward, April, Warren, Cody, Darryl, Patrick, and Brian under ‘difficult to categorize’. For a sense of how I came to categorize the interviewees see Appendix XII, which contains a table that features select quotations from each interviewee on the question “Do you think that atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada?”

A sense of uncertainty permeates many of the interviewees' answers. Moreover, there is no consensus on whether or not the public and/or the media understand atheism in Canada, with some members feeling that they do, and others expressing the opposite opinion. Some mentioned an atheist stigma, some expressed concern about said stigma, some acknowledged a stigma but did not seem too concerned about it, and others either downplayed a stigma or denied there was a stigma altogether. Another theme that came up was that of 'Canadian politeness', the idea that Canadians are by and large polite and tend to avoid controversy. The concept here is that, socially, the topic of atheism does not come up very often, nor does religion. Another theme worth noting is that of interviewees bringing the United States of America up for comparative purposes, with some interviewees acknowledging that they knew less of the Canadian (ir)religious climate than that of their southern neighbors. That theme is addressed in the next chapter.

The notion that atheism is not covered by the media came up a lot, but not necessarily as a complaint. Instead this notion was offered as an explanation for why atheism is not widely understood, but it also explains why it has not been vilified. Others saw the media as misrepresenting atheism by referring to "celebrity atheists," as Brian (see 7.2.1) put it; atheists such as Richard Dawkins who do not speak for all atheists but are treated as atheist spokespeople. Overall though there was not a sense that a lack of understanding about atheism in Canada was concerning or problematic, it came across more as a fact of life in a country where religion itself is increasingly irrelevant, socially and politically.

To put this into context this discussion will briefly turn to an examination of how atheists from other Canadian atheist organizations frame their concerns about religion, and what this might tell us about how they see atheism in Canada. Although these concerns come from the

authoritative voices within these communities, they do shed some light on how the responses of my interviewees from both groups compare to other Canadian atheist discourses.

It is clear from press releases by some atheist groups that they are quite concerned about aspects of religion harming society, but they are not necessarily anti-religion or anti-theist in an overarching general sense. Instead, they often support and even promote freedom of religion while also stressing their freedom to be free from religion, primarily in public (or stately) spaces. The Centre For Inquiry (CFI), for example, was against Quebec's charter of values,⁴²² with spokesperson Justin Trottier explaining in a press release that:

The Charter has precisely the wrong aim, to take religion away from people, while ignoring institutional favouritism which biases the public square away from state neutrality and is therefore the more serious threat to equality of treatment between believer and nonbeliever, [...]

We don't support a blanket ban on public employees wearing religious symbols, [...] But we do stress that religious forms of expression are due no more respect than secular forms, [...] Where state neutrality or its perception is an issue the same rules should apply to all forms of expression.⁴²³

From the perspective of Trottier, and by extension CFI, a ban on public employees wearing religious symbols would strip citizens of their religious freedom while not addressing the real barriers to "equality of treatment between believer and nonbeliever." Instead the CFI favoured a secularism charter that would "take the crucifix off the wall at the National Assembly, remove Christian prayer at public city council meetings, and revoke special property tax exemptions for

⁴²² Secular Ontario, on the other hand, came out in favour of the Quebec Charter of Values in an open letter to the Quebec Minister Responsible for Democratic Institutions and Active Citizenship. In doing so they also used language arguing that they support religious freedom, tolerance, and inclusion: "We consider the Quebec Charter of Values to be more inclusive than a tolerance that requires an arbitrary judgment of which symbols are appropriate for its citizens. Dictating which symbols represent our societal identity is fraught with political decisions impacted by lobbying and histrionics. A secular approach is respectful to the general population and specifically to a Canadian 'freedom of religion'. We lose no historic value in evolving but enrich our future with logical change.

We hope that your initiative extends the Quebec perspective to all Canadian society. (Negative press may be based on envy of the leadership position and brave nature of the Charter.) Our national strength is based on diversity and inclusion. We are convinced that the Quebec Charter of Values helps manage a difficult juxtaposition." "Letter from Secular Ontario (English)," <http://www.secularontario.ca/>, *Secular Ontario*, Letter to Bernard Drainville, Quebec Minister Responsible for Democratic Institutions and Active Citizenship, January 2014, accessed March 18, 2015.

⁴²³ 2013, "CFI Canada Rejects the Quebec's [sic] Secular Charter. You Know, It Could Be Flawed," <http://www.mysecretatheistblog.com/2013/09/cfi-canada-rejects-quebecs-secular.html>, *My Secret Atheist Blog*, September 13, accessed February 13, 2014.

religious buildings.”⁴²⁴ While the CFI takes issue with “institutional favouritism” of religion it does so using a language of equality and does not seek to strip individuals of their freedom of religion, which they consider on par with the freedom of expression.

This sense of striving for equality with religious believers rather than straight-forward opposition to religion and religious practices can also be found in the discourse surrounding the creation of Canada’s Office of Religious Freedom (see Chapter 2 section 2.2.1). On the day of the office’s official opening, CFI and Humanist Canada issued a joint statement, calling on Foreign Affairs Minister John Baird to “include the perspectives of the non-religious in the new office.”⁴²⁵ The statement called for the inclusion of secular voices within the new office, while respecting its main goal of investigating religious discrimination: “Both groups stated that while they applaud the diversity displayed by the announcement, they are concerned that the Foreign Minister may ignore the plight of non-religious people across the world.”⁴²⁶

The significance here is that secular (i.e. atheist/agnostic/skeptic) groups are pointing to global cases of discrimination against atheists,⁴²⁷ as opposed to arguing that Canada needs to

⁴²⁴ Ibid.

⁴²⁵ 2013, “Secular Groups Left Out of Office of Religious Freedom Announcement,” <http://www.marketwired.com/press-release/-1758097.htm>, *Market Wired*, February 19, accessed February 13, 2015.

⁴²⁶ Ibid.

⁴²⁷ Significantly, while not an atheist organization, the Canadian Civil Liberties Association also posted a blog, written by Allison Render of McGill University which agreed with the CFI/Humanist statement. Render argued that “secular groups should be full partners” in the Office of Religious Freedom, and she listed many global incidents in which atheists are discriminated against and persecuted:

“Non-believers are often forced to submit to religious family courts, send their children to schools that provide religious instruction with no secular alternative, or to identify as a member of a religion they don’t believe in to obtain government documents or run for public office. They may be prosecuted for apostasy if they leave the religion of their birth, or even lose their citizenship. These are primarily freedom of conscience issues.

Atheists also face violence and discrimination in many countries. Ahmed Rajib Haider, a blogger critical of fundamentalist Islam, was brutally murdered near his home in Bangladesh less than two weeks ago. In the aftermath, riots broke out with protesters demanding the death penalty for atheist bloggers.

Many of these problems impact religious minorities as well. Yet in some countries atheists are uniquely disadvantaged, by laws that grant official recognition to several minority religions (but not atheism), or provide no secular marriage regime, requiring non-believers to leave their country to marry outside a religious system.”

See Allison Render, 2013, “Op Ed: Religious Freedom Office Must Protect Non-Believers Too,” <http://www.ccla.org/rightswatch/2013/02/25/op-ed-religious-freedom-office-must-protect-non-believers-too/>, *Canadian Civil Liberties Association*, February 25, accessed February 13, 2015.

solve its own internal problems with discrimination against atheists. Yet atheist organizations have been engaged with issues whereby religion is seen as encroaching upon freedom from religion, as well as where it is perceived as being harmful to society, in Canada as well as internationally. A brief search of CFI Canada's press releases (which, as of this writing in February 2015, does not extend backward in time on their website past 2013) shows that the national organization is most recently concerned with: 'Gay Straight Alliances' being allowed to operate in Ontario's Catholic schools; Russian President Vladimir Putin's "anti-gay agenda"; federal cuts and changes to scientific institutions, research, and the reporting of results; the 'teaching evolution' debate in the US (for a video documentary screening); the persecution of Christians in Egypt; and, Trinity Western University's application to the Federation of Law Societies of Canada (they called for a rejection of the application due to what they argue is the university's discrimination against LGBTQ students).⁴²⁸ Although this is a small sample, it is clear that over the last year and a half 50% of the CFI's press releases are about domestic concerns, with the other 50% being about international concerns.⁴²⁹ None of their press releases dealt directly with atheism.

Lorna Mumford has explained that the issue her nonreligious interviewees from London, England, have with religion is not the private beliefs of adherents, but when religious ideas and practices cause harm to people:

Almost all of my participants insist they have no objection to individuals holding private religious beliefs, indeed many would argue that they fully support their right to do so; what concerns them is when religion

⁴²⁸ All of these press releases can be found at <http://centreforinquiry.ca/category/press-release/> (page one) and <http://centreforinquiry.ca/category/press-release/page/2/> (page 2). The original titles and dates (when available/posted) for the cited topics are (respectively): "Catholic School Board Breaking the Law, Complaint," March 11, 2014; "Ask the Religion Experts: Should we boycott the Sochi Olympics?"; "STAND UP FOR SCIENCE" No date of press release noted on CFI's official website); "The Revisionaries in Vernon" (No date of press release noted on CFI's official website); "CFI condemns attacks on religious groups in Egypt," August 7, 2013; "Deny Law School Accreditation to Anti-Gay University," August 7, 2013. "Press Release," <http://centreforinquiry.ca/category/press-release/>, *Centre for Inquiry*, accessed February 13, 2015.

⁴²⁹ Interestingly, in terms of agenda, 50% of the CFI's press releases deal with LGBTQ issues.

extends beyond the private realm and exerts influence on society and politics. In particular they demonstrate concern over those religious ideas and practices they assess as detrimentally impacting on people's lives.⁴³⁰

This is similar to how Canadian atheist organizations such as the CFI and Humanist Canada portray their motivation – they support freedom of religion but act as a ‘watchdog’ for incidents whereby they perceive religion being harmful to society, which includes religion being imposed on those who wish to live free from religious influence. While outreach and increased visibility are certainly concerns for these organizations, they do not frame themselves as being in need of civil rights or as a persecuted minority, rather, they frame themselves as concerned global citizens who highlight select injustices. Similarly, my interviewees were unsure as to how well understood atheism was in Canada by the public and the media, but they were not concerned with the treatment of atheism in Canada, although they had no problem pointing out injustices against atheism in places like the United States. None of the interviewees gave the impression that they were seriously concerned for their wellbeing because they were atheists, but they did occasionally come across as critical of religion because of specific issues that they felt placed Canadians in general (and international atheists) in harm's way.

7.4 Conclusion

Overall, both the ACUO and NGAA interviewees expressed an initial sense of uncertainty as to how well the Canadian public and the media understand atheism, with most reflecting that neither understands atheism very well. Some noted that the media portrayed atheists in light of New Atheist ‘spokespeople’ such as Richard Dawkins, while others could not recall atheism being addressed in Canadian media. Significantly, the perceived lack of media interest was not mentioned as a criticism, but more of a straight-forward fact. Some interviewees

⁴³⁰ Lorna Mumford, “Living Non-religious,” 166.

did, however, point to the coverage and experiences of atheists in the United States as problematic, meaning that even though atheism in Canada was considered somewhat neutral in its perceived lack of coverage, the plight of atheists in other places was considered quite concerning.

Similarly to many of my interviewees, the authoritative voices from some prominent Canadian atheist groups, particularly the CFI, often highlight the plight of persecuted atheists in international settings without comparing international issues to that of Canadian atheists. While they do address instances where they perceive religion in Canada intruding upon non-religious citizens, or minority (often LGBTQ) rights, they do not stress Canadian atheists as having the same severity of difficulties as those from other countries where persecution of atheists is normative. The narrative they often use is that freedom of religion is good, but the same freedom must apply to those who wish to live free from religion.

The notion that religion does not come up very often in polite company, because religion is a controversial topic and Canadians tend to avoid conflict, came out in a few interviews and this may explain the lack of concern atheists have about the perception of atheism in Canada. If it is impolite to discuss religion with new acquaintances then social interactions with people of diverse religiosities are less prone to be 'religiously charged' and the topic of atheism is also less likely to be raised. Moreover, unless advertising or discussing one's nonbelief and/or opinions on religion, atheists do not have outwardly-identifiable traits such as the wearing of religious symbols, requesting a day off from work for religious services, or ethno-cultural associations with their religious orientations. As a result it is easy to see how atheists can, by choice or by default, remain 'invisible' in daily social interactions in a way that those who wear overt religious symbols cannot. This is not to argue that atheists often hide that part of their identity,

but it is to suggest that if religion does not arise very often in conversations with acquaintances, employers and co-workers, etc., that the default would be to remain ‘religiously undetected’ unless they chose to reveal their atheism.

Atheist identities are constructed, in part, through how atheists perceive they are imagined by others, which in turn impacts on their own self perceptions. In terms of Canadian atheist identity, atheists do not tend to perceive themselves as being imaged by other Canadians as ‘un-Canadian’, and some atheists see a lack of religiosity as normative in Canada. On the other hand, atheists tend to view the public and the media as not understanding atheism, so while identifying as an atheist to others may not be particularly controversial it is nevertheless often done selectively. Overall, it seems clear from these 40 interviews that atheists do not feel excluded from Canadian society, and they are not explicitly concerned with the public’s perception of atheism, especially in comparison with their closest neighbour.

The next chapter addresses the frequency with which the US was raised, unprompted, for comparative or narrative purposes. It first explores the points that were often made about the US, and then analyzes why the US was raised as often as it was in response to questions pertaining to perceptions about atheism in Canada.

Chapter Eight: Imagining Ourselves as Different: Atheism in Canada vs. the United States of America

Most of the things that I dislike about religion and politics is all related mostly to the US. Like, I think we have a lighter religion up over here, um, but you know, if you watch the news it's mostly about what's happening down there.

– Mike, 28, undergraduate student in History

[M]ost of the media reports and most of the stuff that you hear and see is coming out of the US. The media there is quite hostile, so. In Canada, I don't know, I haven't really seen a good news article about atheism coming out of Canada. I certainly haven't seen us attacked on CBC. I have seen us attacked on Fox News.

– Darryl, 30, software engineer

In 2014, *CNN's Belief Blog* editor Daniel Burke wrote an article entitled “Atheists in the Bible Belt: A survival guide.”⁴³¹ The article was based on interviews with participants at a “Freedom From Religion in the Bible Belt” conference which took place in Raleigh, North Carolina, United States of America (US), and attracted “more than 220 atheists, agnostics, skeptics and freethinkers.”⁴³² The survival ‘tips’ the article mentions include: “looking online for atheist support groups in your area”; avoiding arguments with fundamentalists; knowing when to ‘come out’ as an atheist (“[s]ometimes it’s better to stay in the closet”); having a plan for coming out, such as one proposed by the Recovering From Religion support group (creating a support network, declining debates and preparing for “a ‘religious breakup’ with friends and family”); avoiding being the “office atheist” (being aware of potential discrimination at work); knowing that the “internet is your frenemy” (a good place to find “like-minded communities” but

⁴³¹ Daniel Burke, “Atheists in the Bible Belt: A Survival Guide,” <http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2014/05/24/atheists-in-the-bible-belt-a-survival-guide/>, *CNN Belief Blog*, May 24, 2014, accessed May 24, 2014.

⁴³² *Ibid.*

your digital trail can inadvertently ‘out’ you); and maintaining a sense of humour (“[f]or all the heartbreaking stories, if there was a soundtrack to the conference in Raleigh, it would include a lot of laughter.”).⁴³³

As an example of discrimination in the Southern United States, in this case the teenage high school experience, Burke writes of his interview with one of the attendees:

Kalei Wilson, 15, says she lost friends after trying to start a secular student club at Pisgah High School in Canton, North Carolina; and someone used a Bible to destroy her science project, leaving the holy book on her smashed model of the universe.

The blue-haired, nose-pierced freshman says she’s not the only atheist at her high school, but most of them are closeted.

“I didn’t want to come out at first,” Wilson says, “but in order to start the club I had to.”

In exchange for her openness, Wilson says, some students mutter “Jesus loves you” as she walks down the hall, and she regularly receives text messages with the greeting, “Hey, Satan.”

“I’ve lost friends because of it,” the teenager says of her atheism, “but they’re not real friends if that’s what they do.”⁴³⁴

Aleem Maqbool of *BBC News* has also written an article on discrimination against atheists in the States which provides examples of how difficult it can be to ‘come out’ as an atheist to loved ones and in social circles:

At one of the biggest gatherings of atheist students in the country, in Columbus, Ohio, Jamila Bey from the Secular Student Alliance said there were many attendees who were nervous about being interviewed and had indicated so by what they were wearing around their neck.

“Red lanyards mean ‘You may not talk to me’,” says Bey. “A number of the students we have aren’t ‘out’. Their parents may not know that they are atheist or questioning their religion.”

She said many were worried about being ostracised or were even scared of violence if they revealed they did not believe in God.⁴³⁵

Maqbool’s article also addresses the impact of coming out as an atheist in high school (“In high school, when I walked down the hallway it would be completely silent, or I would be spat on,”

⁴³³ Ibid.

⁴³⁴ Ibid.

⁴³⁵ Aleem Maqbool, “The stigma of being an atheist in the US,” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-28616115>, *BBC News*, August 3, 2014, accessed August 3, 2014.

explained “Katelyn Campbell, 19, from West Virginia”⁴³⁶) and how atheists are trying to change this culture of discrimination through initiatives such as *Atheist TV*, which Maqbool calls a “part of atheist groups’ own civil rights movement.”⁴³⁷

These articles are examples of some of the discourse surrounding atheism in the US from the perspective of atheists themselves but filtered through mainstream news media. They exemplify the ‘culture war’ between atheists and theists from which other stories abound, from seriously debating the need for secular chaplains in the military,⁴³⁸ to (arguably) media-goaded/publicity ‘stunts’ such as atheists exchanging Bibles for pornography on a university campus.⁴³⁹ Other recent stories include the organization ‘American Atheists’ being disinvited from hosting an information booth at the 2014 Conservative Political Action Conference (they wanted to represent the 14% of atheists who “self-identify as conservative” while also

⁴³⁶ Ibid.

⁴³⁷ Ibid.

⁴³⁸ See: David Niose, “For Atheists-Humanists, a Loss That’s a Win: Fight over nontheistic chaplains shows prejudice, progress,” *Psychology Today*, June 18, 2013, accessed June 18, 2013.

⁴³⁹ Brent Harris, “Atheists offer porn in exchange for Bibles,”

http://www.worldoncampus.com/2012/04/atheists_offer_porn_in_exchange_for_bibles, *World On Campus*, April 2, 2012, accessed April 4, 2012. “The event caused an uproar on campus in 2008 and made headlines around the world. But this year, few students took notice. During the four hours Atheist Agenda members spent next to their signs each day, only about 30 people stopped by to get information about the club or start a debate. [/] In addition to Bibles, the group offered to collect other religious texts, including the Quran, and any books written by prominent pastors, including Joel Osteen and Rick Warren. During the event, Atheist Agenda collected five Bibles, one Encyclopedia of Islam, and one Quran. The group plans to donate the books to a local library.”

denouncing the link between conservatism and Christianity⁴⁴⁰), atheist billboard campaigns,⁴⁴¹ and the rise of atheist churches (or “Sunday Assemblies”).⁴⁴²

Prior to and during my time interviewing members of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) there were many such stories in American news media, which also often featured Christopher Hitchens or Sam Harris debating religion and atheism. Thanks to *YouTube*, short polemic debates such as those between Richard Dawkins and Bill O’Reilly not only made for entertaining television viewing, but lived online to be shared across borders. Bestselling books such as *The God Delusion* touched on the plight of atheists in the US, online and in-person atheist communities grew, and American atheism became more visible. Relating this to Canada, American stories and debates did not often go unnoticed by many of the atheists I interviewed; they came up in my interviews more than references to Canadian stories and debates about atheism. In fact, while interviewees tended to treat the Canadian public and media’s perception of atheism as relatively benign, many were quite concerned with discrimination against atheists in the US. By doing so they are constructing their atheist identities, or understanding their atheist experiences, through comparison with their perception of the American atheist experience. This chapter addresses how the topic of atheism in the US

⁴⁴⁰ See: Anugrah Kumar, “American Atheists Tells CPAC to Sever Ties With Christianity,” <http://www.christianpost.com/news/american-atheists-tells-cpac-to-sever-ties-with-christianity-115458/>, *Christian Post*, March 1, 2014, accessed March 1, 2014.

⁴⁴¹ For an example of billboards from one prominent American atheist organization see: “Billboards,” <http://atheists.org/activism/billboards>, *American Atheists*, accessed February 21, 2015. On the American Atheists official website they explain their use of billboards: “American Atheists launches billboard campaigns throughout the year to encourage closeted atheists to ‘come out’ and celebrate their atheism. We critique religious bigotry, the use of religion as a weapon by politicians, and the hypocrisy of all religions. These billboards not only encourage atheists to stand up and be heard, but also raise the profile of atheists and atheism in the media and public discourse.”

⁴⁴² Carol Kuruvilla, “The Number Of Sunday Assemblies, Or ‘Atheist Churches,’ More Than Doubled Over One Weekend,” http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/10/01/sunday-assembly-atheist_n_5915830.html, *Huffington Post*, October 1, 2014, accessed February 21, 2015. “The U.S. has been a particularly fruitful ground for this type of thinking, with 16 new congregations starting last weekend.”

was brought up in interviews with members of the ACUO and non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA), Ottawa-area atheists who do not belong to any active (in-person) atheist communities.

8.1 Atheism in Canada vs. the United States of America: ACUO

One interesting and common theme that emerged from discussions about atheism and its perception that emerged spontaneously from interviews was that of an unprompted comparison of Canada with the United States. Many of the interviewees brought up the US during the course of our interview, and much of what they brought up reveals what they think of the state of atheism in Canada. To exemplify this theme – the construction of identity as ‘difference’ through an unprompted discourse on atheism in the United States of America – we now turn to the examples of Mike, Tonya, Brendon, and Matthew.

8.1.1 Mike

Mike, an undergraduate student studying History, is 28 years old. He has lived in Ottawa since he was a child. Mike was raised Roman Catholic, which was a culturally important part of his ethnic background, but the family only went to church for Easter and Christmas, and he was not aware that his father was devout in his Catholic faith until a few years ago (his mother is spiritual and takes the Bible metaphorically). Mike went to Catholic schools until he “pushed for” going to public school in grade ten and his parents agreed with that decision. He recalls having his first confession in grade eight, of which he explains: “my confession was that I don’t really believe in God,” and the response he received was “oh, you just need to have more faith,” something he was not interested in gaining. Mike pinpoints the moment he started to doubt God’s existence as being when he linked his realization that Santa Claus was not real with the question of God’s existence:

I linked all of the benefits of Santa Claus, you know, he keeps a list of naughty and nice, uh, and he'll give you rewards if your good, um, you can't see him but he does all these magical things like he's around the world in one night, um, all these I link to Jesus and then God, um, I made a realization that well Jesus and God are just Santa Claus but for adults, um, so from that point on I knew that it was fiction, it was all myth.

Mike clarified that this connection between Claus and Christ was not an instant one, ("I'd actually stopped believing in Santa Claus first and then, uh, Christ later") but the connection did occur to him between grades one and three ("and then it snapped, I'm like, 'yeah"). This coincided with an interest in science and "how the earth was formed through natural processes."

Following high school he spent some time "questioning and discovering different aspects of spirituality" and "fell in with a pagan crowd." With his Nordic pagan acquaintances he would perform some rituals, such as drinking from a horn and saying an oath, and he did feel a sense of mystery from it in the form of a connection to something greater, although he thinks that may have had something to do with his drug intake at the time: "I was doing mushrooms, ecstasy, absinthe, weed, and whatever anybody would hand to me [...] The whole thing made me feel a bit more connected, um, but it could have also just been the drugs. It was probably the drugs." He still maintained a strong interest in science during his period of mystical questioning and discovery, which turned out to be short-lived, his loss of interest in such experiences coinciding with an interest in New Atheism: "[E]ventually I was just like fuck it, I can't have these contradictions of thought, and I guess that's about when, yeah, where I'm kind of like introduced to the New Atheism and hearing Dawkins." Shortly after reading *The God Delusion*, taking a few Religious Studies electives at university, and noticing religious influences in the world around him, he decided to join the ACUO.

When asked about joining the ACUO, Mike brought up religion in the political establishment of the United States of America as being a main instigator:

I was getting more involved with, I guess, seeing the other side of it, um, and I guess it was around that time as well that, that I started, like, being introduced to Dawkins. [...] Also Bush really pissed me off with his religion going into American politics. Most of the things that I dislike about religion and politics

is all related mostly to the US. Like, I think we have a lighter religion up over here, um, but you know, if you watch the news it's mostly about what's happening down there. They just overtake everything, so again I guess Bush also had a lot to do with it, um, if he thinks that all this holy war stuff is going on then he's like, there, oh yeah, like; attack the Babylonians again, and then... actually through [some of my], um, studies, a lot of the stuff that we are focusing on was Israel-related. And the only reason that Israel has any special privileges is because of the Bible. It's not the only reason but it's a huge reason for it, and you are seeing that global politics around religion is such a big flipping deal. I just wanted out of politics entirely as – I guess that's another reason why I joined is realizing how much influence religion has in this secular world where I think it should have absolutely nothing to do with.

As with many other interviewee's, Mike, unprompted, brought up the United States, (as well as Israel's modern history), as an example of why he believes religion can or should be of serious concern. It was quite common for interviewees to bring the US into the conversation, primarily regarding religion and politics, and in Mike's case he did not add much about Canada, except for noting that he thinks Canadians "have a lighter religion" than Americans, and most of the things he dislikes about religion and politics are related to the US.

8.1.2 Tonya

Tonya is a 25 year-old undergraduate student studying English. She is originally from Eastern Canada but has lived in Ottawa for the three years she has been attending university. Tonya was raised Catholic and believed in God, but following a public argument with a Bishop about the existence of purgatory (he was teaching it to her confirmation class, and she was arguing it was no longer church doctrine) she felt unwelcome in her small town Catholic church: "So, I left and I shamed my family quite seriously, they were very unhappy and I was not welcome back at the church." This occurred when she was between grade eight and nine; following this incident she joined a Baptist youth group but stopped going because she found the members too judgmental. She attended Catholic high school at the time, and after a beloved relative died of AIDS she was told by both Catholics and Baptists that "AIDS is a punishment from God" and "he deserved to die." She struggled with the notion "that God would

purposefully do this to him,” but continued to believe in God. She attended a Wesleyan church for a short period in her mid-to-late teens but it did not last because she found the speaking in tongues and talking about “demonic possession and a war with demons” to be a bit “crazy”.

Following high school Tonya moved west for a while and enjoyed life without “thinking about God” or religion, but she was diagnosed with cancer and returned home to her parents. While her friends told her they were praying for her recovery, Tonya placed more trust in her doctors: “I think that was kind of one of the first times where I was like yeah, okay, maybe on the back burner I will trust God but mostly I am going to trust medicine for right now you know.” At this point she started to self-identify as agnostic; she was not certain of God’s non-existence so she rejected the label of atheism. After recovering from cancer she came to identify as an atheist over an agnostic following a major car accident that nearly killed her and her father and left her immobile and bed-ridden for six months: “[A]fter the car accident [...] I think that was when I was like, no, ‘I am done, I am not, I’m not, there is just too many things, I am not an agnostic anymore. I am just a straight up atheist.’”

The fact that Tonya and her father both survived the serious accident caused friends and family to perceive it as a miracle, or at least that they survived “by the grace of God,” but Tonya felt differently: “I kind of felt like it would have been easier or maybe a little bit better if I had of just died in the car accident right and I know that is, a really weird morbid way of thinking but you know like my leg was shattered. I was in the most pain I have ever been in my entire life, you know? I didn’t see how this was a blessing, you know?” While bed-ridden she watched a lot of videos with Hitchens, Harris and Dawkins, and when she returned to university in Ottawa following her recovery she wanted to learn more about science, and looked in vain for a science club to join on campus. Instead she discovered the ACUO and decided to join, hoping to discuss

topics but also hoping to meet people with whom she could relate: “It was a struggle for me, like it was a *real* battle for me to figure out where I was. You know what I mean? So I hoped that I would find similar people and things like that.” When I asked Tonya why she thinks some people – if she does think some people do – react negatively to atheism, she explained that “they find it threatening” and have misconceptions about atheists, “particularly in the United States, but more and more in Canada.” I asked Tonya about the role religion plays in Canada, and she replied:

I read an article just earlier this morning actually about the rise of evangelical Christians and Evangelical churches in Canada. To me this is concerning and I think that’s one of the things, you know, I have a really big interest in and investment in American politics. I follow it closely, I really am invested. People don’t understand that you know, like, “you’re not an American; why do you care so much?” Because we don’t live in a bubble and the people up here are emboldened by the shit they see down there, you know? [...] I think that religion is very visible in politics you know and yeah, it needs to go. I think if you had a candidate that came anywhere, at any level of government, in Canada that refused to answer any questions on their faith; absolutely refused. “What religion are you?” “Not going to answer that, not going to answer you.” I guarantee that person will not get elected. I guarantee it and it certainly would never happen in the US, but in Canada I don’t think it would happen either. I don’t think that person would stand a chance if that happened or I think that maybe if they came out and said, “I’m an atheist,” or something like that, but I think if a person straight up said, “not relevant.” I don’t think that it would ever happen, that they would ever get elected. Yeah, I think there is a huge problem with religion in politics in Canada and unfortunately we don’t have a first amendment, we don’t have a guarantee of separation of church and state. We sort of do if you look at the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms we have a freedom of religion sort of but there’s nothing that guarantees the separation of Church and State, and I think that’s a problem. At least in the States you have that and you should theoretically be able to take it to court and to challenge these things. But we don’t have that in Canada.

When asked to discuss matters pertaining to religion in Canada, Tonya does so through a comparison with the United States. Amongst other points she expresses her belief that misconceptions about atheism are a concern in Canada but “particularly in the United States,” and she laments Canada’s lack of a First Amendment officially separating church and state. Moreover, it is important for Tonya to discuss the US because she feels Canadians are “emboldened” by what happens “down there.” It should be noted that her opinion that “there is a huge problem with religion in politics in Canada” was atypical; more typical was the suggestion that religion in American politics was more problematic than religion in Canadian politics.

8.1.3 Brendon

Brendon is a 26 year-old undergraduate student working toward a major in Biology. He is in his final year. He grew up in Southern Ontario just outside of a major city and moved to Ottawa for school in 2007. Brendon was raised in what he calls a “secular” family. As a youth he attended Christian camps, which made him curious about Christianity, and when he was about 12 or 13 years old, upon returning from a Christian camp, he asked his mother if they could start going to church: “[S]he just looked at me and said, ‘no.’ And I could tell on her face that she was, ah, that she was not a fan of the idea, so I just left it at that and walked away.” He explains his interest in going to church as being due to looking-up to the older (19/20 year-old) camp councillors, rather than any religious beliefs, and claims that shortly after that incident he maintained “no religious convictions.” He fondly recalls being in a debate on the existence of God in a grade twelve philosophy class in which he came out “guns ablaze” on the side against God’s existence. This was his first time arguing against religious belief publicly, and from that point onward his perspective on religion shifted from “I’m not really religious, but religious people, they’re quaint and they’re sincere and I respect them” to what he calls a more “intolerant perspective” where he does not like putting up with “bogus religious nonsense.”⁴⁴³

When asked if he thought atheists and atheism is well understood by the public, or the media in Canada, Brendon replied:

No, no, no. I don’t at all. Especially in the media – especially in American media, um, so many *Fox News* clips are running in my head right now.

Yeah.

[Laughter]

⁴⁴³ This biography (from “Brendon is a 26 year-old” to “bogus religious nonsense”) was originally published in Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 117-136, 128-129.

I'm just, you know, picturing half-truths and, you know, misconstrued ideas about atheism, like Richard Dawkins and Bill O'Reilly, when they go at it, and Bill O'Reilly says something like, "you can't explain how the moon got there," right, "explain the tides,"⁴⁴⁴ and it's ironic for one: that we can explain that with science, and two: that people actually buy that. It shows me that people aren't really... well Christians in the states, they aren't really being intellectually honest when they approach these issues, which makes sense that they're indoctrinated for the most part, right?

Yeah.

You have polls in the states that say 40% of... what was it? Some ridiculous percent of Americans are convinced – literally convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt – that Jesus will return to Earth in the next 50 years, and then another ridiculous percent are pretty sure that's going to happen. Um, if you're of that persuasion I don't think you're really going to understand where atheists are coming from. I don't know how you could be.

Yeah.

If that makes sense.

Yeah, yeah, it makes sense. In Canada do you think it comes up at all?

In Canada?... I think there's less... I could be wrong; it appears to me there's less religious fanaticism in Canada, then in the States, where our politics are less influenced by the Christian Right; we have gay marriage, and ah, it doesn't fly down south yet. But there's definitely a stigma associated with atheism, I'd say.

I asked Brendon to clarify what this 'stigma' was in Canada, to which he mentioned that "people misconstrue atheism with worshiping Satan," and that atheists are misconstrued as not being "morally grounded."

When asked a question directly related to Canada, Brendon immediately answered with regard to the United States; his first thought seemed to be of American media, and how they spread "half-truths" and misconstrue "ideas about atheism." When the discussion was brought back to Canada his initial response was to compare the two countries, noting that religion plays a lesser role in Canada than in the United States, before explaining that he believes Canada has a stigma associated with atheism.

⁴⁴⁴ This seems to refer to an interview that Dawkins did with Bill O'Reilly, which is widely available on YouTube and was originally aired on *The O'Reilly Factor (Fox News)*, April 24, 2007. In the interview O'Reilly argued: "I think it takes more faith to be like you, an atheist, than like me, a believer, and it's because of nature, you know, I just don't think we could have lucked out to have the tides come in, the tides go out, the sun go up, the sun go down. Don't think it could have happened."

8.1.4 Matthew

Matthew is a 21 year-old third year undergraduate student in International Development. He grew up in an Eastern Ontario city and has been living in Ottawa for two and a half years. Of his religious background Matthew stated, “I don’t really have a religious background to begin with,” before explaining that he thinks a couple of his grandparents “might have been raised as Lutherans” but “otherwise it’s played a very small role” in his family. He did tour a “Sunday school or Bible Camp” but his mother lost interest in sending him there after she learned that other children were mistreating frogs.

When asked when he started describing himself as an atheist Matthew explained that it would have been “at the beginning of high school, or at the end of elementary school” when he “first saw a film by Richard Dawkins [*The Root of all Evil?*, Channel 4, 2006].” He joined the ACUO because he wanted to connect “with fellow admirers of um, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris,” and sees the community as a forum for like-minded humour, a place to consider “the latest absurd current events or even of history in general” and a place for the expression of new ideas.”

Matthew raised the comparison with the United States in a few places. One was when I asked him if he thinks that there is a change in how atheists of younger generations approach or frame atheism, compared to atheists of older generations:

It’s hard to tell, it’s hard for me to tell because I haven’t known many people of older generations who specifically identify with the term, although I would assume that the younger ones are having more of an emphasis on being open and coming out ‘cause in the past decades openly atheists were such a small segment of the population and they are still a small minority but there is still much greater tolerance and much greater non-religious population in general and, um, varied. I have never myself come across any anti-atheist prejudice and in person and I would suspect that uh, well it’s becoming much less of a problem like even in recent polling of the American electorate, there is now a slight majority of Americans that say they would be willing to consider holding an atheist for president, when it used to be only a majority against.

When I asked him if he thinks that atheists and atheism is well understood by the public or the media in Canada, he replied:

I don't think it is, but um, I suspect religion wouldn't in itself be either, um, because, um well, on the one hand many people define atheists not just as people who disbelieve in God but as people who have this active, um, political or social stance against the role of religion in society, and on the other hand many people would say, identify as Catholic, but not even pay attention to Catholic positions on abortion or homosexuality, and although I haven't seen a similar survey for Canada I know that in the United States there has been some surveys paradoxically showing poor knowledge of the Bible in spite of the United States being a more Christian nation than Canada, so, I would have to conclude that both religion and atheism are widely misunderstood by the public and media, and because it's become so sensitive that our politicians don't even want to talk publically about their religion, and the media in paying attention to that sensitivity, doesn't try to ask tough questions or provoke it, basically.

Here Matthew provides yet another example of an interviewee answering a question about atheism in Canada by referencing the United States; in this case two questions. He seems to have some knowledge on American polls and surveys about atheism and religion, and he uses that knowledge to speculate on how atheism is understood in the Canadian context, concluding that “both religion and atheism are widely misunderstood.”

8.2 Atheism in Canada vs. the United States of America: NGAA

The NGAA interviewees also brought up the United States quite frequently, slightly less so than the ACUO interviewees, but still within the majority of interviews. In order to show how the US came up as a topic of discussion in these interviews we now turn to the examples of Darryl, Tracy, Ian, and George.

8.2.1 Darryl

Darryl is a 30 year-old software engineer. He has lived in Ottawa for most of his life. Most of Darryl's friends are atheists and/or agnostics and his parents are atheists. He was raised in what he calls “an atheistic household.” Although his parents were and still are atheists, they occasionally took him to church when he was questioning religion:

[M]y parents were very... they did believe very strongly in letting me make my own choices. They didn't tell me when I was a child that there is a God and this is true. They didn't send me to Sunday school but being in school and being around other people that hold those kinds of beliefs, yeah, I got interested in it and when I asked questions my parents took me to church and my family, for a while we would go to midnight mass at Christmas.

While he was interested in religion for a period growing up, Darryl does not think he ever actually believed in God: "I don't really remember what I truly believed when I was a child. I don't think that I ever really went through a period of true belief." Likewise, he says he "never had to experience the loss of faith." He does not recall the moment he first identified as an atheist, but he does recall that he "was always a really outspoken kid and if somebody said, 'hey, there's a God,'" he'd say, "no there isn't."

A comparison to the United States of America came out when I asked Darryl if he thinks atheists and atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada:

In Canada, I am not sure because the topic isn't really... isn't discussed that much here. I mean, most of the media reports and most of the stuff that you hear and see is coming out of the US. The media there is quite hostile, so. In Canada, I don't know, I haven't really seen a good news article about atheism coming out of Canada. I certainly haven't seen us attacked on *CBC*. I have seen us attacked on *Fox News*.

Interesting! Why do you think that is?

In Canada?

Yeah.

I don't think... for some reason the religious right doesn't have nearly the sway here that they do in the US and I would not begin to try and tease apart the reasons, historical and social reasons, for that. It's not my area, but I mean there has got to have been something back in history that caused that to happen that didn't happen up here.

When asked to discuss the public and the media's understanding of atheism in Canada, Darryl does so through a comparison with the United States. Amongst other points, he expressed his opinion that "most of the media reports" on atheism Canadians receive come from their southern neighbor; that the American media "is quite hostile," but he has not seen atheism attacked by the *CBC* (Canada's popular state broadcaster).

8.2.2 Tracy

Tracy is a 21 year-old undergraduate student studying Sociology. She has lived in Ottawa for five years, before that she lived in Southern Ontario. Tracy describes her family as “fresh off the boat [ethnic Southern European] Catholic,” and she said she “will never come out as an atheist” to them. Likewise, back home her friends are also Catholic and raised in the same ethnic setting and she “will probably keep pretending to be Catholic with them for the rest of her life.” Noteworthy is that, although her parents and brother are religious, Tracy has discovered that her sister is also an atheist. She discovered this when she found her sister’s hidden copy of Hitchens’ *God is Not Great*.

Tracy was raised Roman Catholic, and, following “very patriarchal” ethnic customs, she would stay at home with her mother and sister to prepare lunch while her father and brother went to church. It was at university when she really began questioning religion, having taken some Religious Studies courses: “I was just sitting there and I was like, ‘nothing makes sense’. It was in that moment, I was like, ‘ah, dammit; I have to rethink my life outlook.’” She describes this period as “scary” because “suddenly you find yourself completely alone and there are too many unknowns which religion offers the answers to, and then suddenly you don’t have those unknowns answered for you so you have to kind of become okay with the fact you’re just an individual and there is no real purpose, because we don’t know the purpose.”

Most of her friends in Ottawa are atheists who were raised secularly. She has no interest in joining an atheist community because she thinks “it’s a lot of political stuff and I think you can separate religion from politics. I don’t think it has to be involved. You can respect other people’s beliefs without having to put them down all the time and promote yourself.”

When I asked her if she thinks that atheists and atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada, Tracy replied:

No! I think there are so many different types of atheists that for the media it's about a sensational story, and so they are going to focus on the most extreme atheism, atheists out there and those are the ones that get attention. So, in turn a lot of people don't voice their atheism because the general public, what they know about atheism is what they hear in the news.

The discussion turned to a few rather irrelevant things for this section, but returning the interview back to the question about Canada, I asked Tracy what the caricature of atheism in the media is, considering that she views the media as focusing on the "most extreme atheism":

Well, just like our media, when they go overseas to Muslim countries they're going to focus on the crazy Muslims that are being really 'fundamentalist' and 'extremists' and 'terrible' and those kind of words to describe it. They are going to choose the rednecks of the Middle East to choose because that's what makes the story and that's what people want to see. So, I think that's what the media does, and in turn we read the media and that's what the public perception of a lot of atheists are. Like, if you are Catholic... you're Catholic, and you identify as a Catholic or if you are Jewish you identify... like; there is a group and like there are subgroups but no one has really come out with subgroups of atheism. So then you are just opening yourself up for more debate about, "well, you're a religion unto yourself even though you don't believe in God." Which, I guess opens up some good debate because people start questioning what religion is, but it's not widespread enough yet. Especially in American media which is what we get a lot of up here.

Tracy brought the United States up simply to point out that "we get a lot of" American media in Canada, an opinion shared by Darryl, but in so doing she made some interesting comments on how she views the media in Canada. To Tracy, the American media that Canadians watch exaggerate toward the negative; they focus on the extreme rather than try to understand the nuances of religions like Islam, and atheism receives no better treatment.

8.2.3 Ian

Ian is a 26 year-old PhD student studying Physics. He grew up in the United States and moved to Ottawa four years ago. Ian's parents are culturally Catholic, and although he describes them as not being "nearly as devout as some other Catholics" he knows, he says that they nonetheless "identify strongly with the label" and "find the idea that" he does not identify as a Catholic to be "deeply discomfoting." Ian has not believed in God since the fourth grade after

doing “plenty of reading and searching and asking questions,” although he is “hesitant to say” that before that period “he believed in much of anything.”

After Ian started reading atheist personality PZ Myers’ blog in 2009 he began to identify with the term ‘atheist’. He joined the Centre For Inquiry (CFI) but by the time of our interview his membership lapsed and he did not renew it, partly due to his disagreement with the “national level management” which he does not think is “in tune with what the actual members of the organization want the organization to do.” Although he is “deeply appreciative” of the existence of groups such as CFI, he is “not officially a member” anymore because the organization “did not conform to [his] values.”

Since Ian has an American background, during the interview a comparison between the United States and Canada came quite naturally to him and he offered some interesting personal reflections. When I asked him if atheists and atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada, for example, he immediately answered: “Recognized sort of, understood, no not at all. It is much worse in the US than in Canada but I think a lot of Canadians who are in a position to make decisions that affect the lives of atheists have a fairly poor grasp of what atheism means to people who subscribe to that ideal.” This organic and insightful comparison came out in our exchange on negative reactions. When I asked him if he had ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned that he was an atheist, he answered, “Frequently!” and elaborated on his American upbringing (disapproval by a childhood friend and his parents). Bringing the conversation back to his experiences in Canada he noted that his “current girlfriend took that as a point against me until I convinced her that I was right,” and her parents are “ashamed that we are not ashamed of ourselves.” When I asked Ian what he tells

people, in Canada, when they ask what his religious beliefs are, or what his religion is, he replied:

I usually pause for an awkward amount of time after that trying to figure out whether it is safe to be honest with that person. I am used to the default being it's not actually safe – in [my] American [ethnic] Catholic background it's not a good thing to say unless you are prepared to have a really long and unpleasant conversation afterward. I have noticed also in Canada it seems to be considered impolite to ask that question unless the context has already been set up somehow.

That's an interesting point; in the States, assuming you mean that it's not uncommon to ask "what's your religion?" in Canada, do you think it's kind of...

It seems to be a lot less common. People seem to be a lot less interested in what other peoples' religion is here. Which on the one hand is great because it means I get asked way less often but on the other hand, it means that when I do get asked I know the person is breaching normal politeness rules in order to do so, so I wonder what exactly I am supposed to take from that? Ironically in [my ethnic] community, Catholicism is so assumed that often they don't ask because they think they already know the answer, which is weird because Evangelical, Pentecostal, and Mormon groups are making such inroads with [that community]. It is becoming a question people don't actually know the answer to. There, on the handful of occasions where people have asked me I have been uncomfortable telling them what the answer is but not because I am ashamed of what it is, if that makes sense. Usually here I haven't gotten a bad reception necessarily, confused sometimes, like they don't know what to do with that information.

Why do you think that is, that it is less of a question people ask in Canada?

I am not sure. I have noticed, at least from this Americans perspective, that Canada actually is much more polite than the United States. I wonder if Canadians see themselves that way sometimes, or if they just think Americans are rude or what.

Ian brought up the United States more often than any other interviewee, but that is to be expected considering that he lived in the US for most of his life. He thus offers a unique perspective on the differences between Canada and the US which is based on his lived experiences. Ian mentions that atheism is "not at all" understood in the US, although Canada is better in this regard (with a stipulation for policy makers). He believes reactions to ones disclosure of atheism in Canada are sometimes "confused" whereas in the US negative reactions occur more frequently. He also touches upon the caricature of Canadians being polite, explaining that in Canada asking someone about their religion "seems to be a lot less common" than in the US, that "[p]eople seem to be a lot less interested in what other peoples' religion is here," and that, from his perspective, Canada actually "is much more polite than the United States."

8.2.4 George

George is 42 years-old and is a small business owner and motel employee. He has traveled extensively and lived around the world, including the United States, and has lived in Ottawa for twenty-eight years. He “sometimes” describes himself as an atheist but more often than not he describes himself as a humanist. His brother and one of his “two best friends is an atheist;” his “other best friend is a Roman Catholic.” He guesses his father is an atheist and his mother is a Christian, although he hardly speaks to her, having been raised by his father.

Growing up, his father “didn’t push religion on [him] whatsoever,” although he did attend Catholic school and Catholic summer camps as a child. He became an atheist in grade one after sneaking downstairs on Christmas Eve to spy on Santa only to see his father putting presents under the Christmas tree – by evening Christmas Day he had a revelation that “Jesus isn’t real either”: “I was like, ‘Wow, if my parents – actually both of them were there at the time – if my parents can lie to me about Santa, they can lie to me about anything.’ [...] I was like, ‘oh my God, what else could they be lying to me about?’” George recalls self-identifying as an atheist in grade three. The following exchange includes a comparison with the United States:

Do you think atheists and atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada?

Not at all!

Is that for both public and media, or anything specific?

Probably both, yeah, [the] public and media really don’t understand. I watch a lot of *CNN*, unfortunately I should watch more Canadian but their news is just so much more polarized and exciting. You know over here our politicians apologize to each other, you know, we half agree, you know, at least we agree half the time on stuff you know; it makes for boring news. Down there they’re always at each other’s jugular. Do I want to watch a drama or an action flick? You know, watching *CNN* is more like an action movie, you know, when you watch on the political side anyway.

Bringing the interview back to the topic of Canada, I asked him why he had mentioned that the public or the media in Canada does not have a good understanding of atheism:

Sheer numbers! We are just not, we’re a minority, that’s it, we are just a minority. Most politicians in the media are religious folks and are believers or at least say they are to get elected. It is not quite as bad I think in Canada as it is in the States. You know, you have more, well certainly a more dominant Christian majority down in the States. Here it is more spread out and atheists are... it’s funny, I don’t even know the stats for Canada. I know in the States in the last five years atheism has gone up like 5% and that’s not a

static, that's not a line. It has been a slowly, you know, exponentially increasing you know, and, but I just think it's – we are still a minority, and there is going to be a major tipping point once you get to the point where it's okay to be an atheist. Once the percentage of atheists gets high enough, already the percentage of atheists that are out there is way more than what's reported, because you have the closet atheists.

When asked a question directly related to Canada, George immediately answered with reference to the United States. He enjoys the polarization of American news, and when the discussion was brought back to Canada he continued to answer through a comparison with the US, explaining that politicians at least claim to be religious to get elected before remarking that he does not think that phenomenon is as bad “in Canada as it is in the States.” He also noted that he does not know the statistics on atheism in Canada but he is familiar with some statistics south of the border, and he acknowledges having more interest in American media than Canadian media, since he finds the polarization of politics in the former more entertaining.

8.3 Discussion

When asked specifically about atheism in Canada, an unprompted comparison between Canada and the US, or even just a discussion about atheism in the US, became a common theme amongst both sets of interviews, albeit with *slightly* more frequency amongst interviewees from the ACUO than the NGAA.⁴⁴⁵ That it was raised quite often amongst the forty interviews as a whole certainly shows an awareness of American media culture, but it also hints at that culture's influence on Canada, and, in some cases, an awareness of that influence on Canada.

When raised for comparative purposes, the US was *always* depicted as more religious than Canada, and the plight of atheists in the US was portrayed as being of more serious concern. Comparisons also tended to highlight the lack of discussion about atheism in Canada. Brendon's

⁴⁴⁵ It is difficult to provide a statistical figure for raising the US during these interviews, in that there is a difference between mentioning the US *in passing* and raising the US as a *main topic* for comparative or non-comparative purposes, and in some cases the line between those two purposes of use (in passing/main topic) is blurry. Overall, however, members of the ACUO raised the US as a topic slightly more often than did the NGAA in terms of frequency and emphasis, but not enough to warrant considering this a major difference.

(see 8.1.3) first thoughts, for example, when asked about Canadian media was to think of *Fox News*, an American media channel and outlet; Matthew (8.1.4) could not recall any Canadian surveys on atheism but he was familiar with surveys south of the border; and George (8.4.4) was familiar with American statistics pertaining to atheism but was not familiar with any such statistics for Canada. When not raised for comparative purposes the US was simply cited in order to answer the principle question addressed in the last chapter about how well atheism in Canada is understood, the insinuation being that how atheism is perceived or understood in the US affects how atheism is perceived north of the border.

American media was a particular point of interest. Tracy (8.2.2) felt that Canadians “get a lot of” American media, Darryl (8.2.1) similarly believed that “most of the media reports” on atheism that Canadians receive originate in the US. The hostility/polemics of American media came up quite often, painting Canadian media, by default, as timid and nuanced. By bringing up the US as a topic interviewees were primarily differentiating their Canadian atheist experience with the American atheist experience.

Ian (8.3.3) brought up the US more than any other interviewee because he grew up in the States, his immediate family still lives there, and he became quite familiar with the normative state of religion in the US since it juxtaposed negatively with his identification as an atheist (and, by extension, painting him as an ‘abnormal’ American citizen) at an early age. His experiences of the religious culture in the US fits well with Phil Zuckerman’s description of that culture:

Here in the United States, religion is definitely alive and well. In fact, religion in the United States – in terms of church attendance and belief in God, Jesus, and the Bible – is stronger and more robust than in most other developed democracies. [...] In addition to the proliferation of religious bumper stickers and billboards, Christianity in America today is being steadily broadcast from radio stations and television channels with unprecedented dynamism. As for the nation’s politicians, both Republicans and Democrats seem to be more publicly religious than ever, going out of their way to emphasize their faith. And Americans seem to like it that way.⁴⁴⁶

⁴⁴⁶ Zuckerman, *Society*, 1-2.

Noteworthy here is how little of this description can be applied to Canada. Religion in Canada is not “stronger and more robust than in most other developed democracies”; while Christian bumper stickers, billboards, radio and television stations certainly do exist in Canada, they are not prolific nor unprecedentedly dynamic; and Canadian politicians are *less* publicly religious than ever, not *more* (see Chapter 2 section 2.2.1). From Ian’s perspective, Canadians are less interested in religion than Americans, and from the perspective of my other interviewees if they wanted to tell a story that includes *conflict* a natural avenue for discussion would be the US and the apparent religion/atheism dichotomy since that dichotomy is less polemically addressed in Canadian media. According to J. Edward Chamberlin, “Conflict is at the heart of the way language works, and therefore the way stories work as well.”⁴⁴⁷ If interviewees wanted to tell better stories, the conflict found in the American atheist experience would make for better subject matter than those about the Canadian atheist experience, which is another reason that may explain why the interviewees commonly brought up the US when asked about atheism in Canada. That the US was raised by many interviewees in response to a question pertaining specifically to Canada shows that they construct their identities, view their situation, and understand their experiences, at least partly through comparison to others – in this case American atheists.

8.4 Conclusion

Many of the interviewees from both the ACUO and the NGAA mentioned the US quite frequently, showing a familiarity with American news and in some cases scholarly works, such

⁴⁴⁷ J. Edward Chamberlin, “If This is Your Land, Where are your Stories? Finding Common Ground,” Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf Canada, 2003), 25.

as surveys and statistics, and when raised as a topic it was either for comparative purposes or non-comparative purposes.

Comparisons served to highlight the differences between Canada and the US, stressing the negative circumstances atheists face south of the border and, by extension, painting Canada in a much more positive light. They also served to show how atheism garners more mainstream media attention and coverage in the US than in Canada. When raised for non-comparative purposes it seems that in some cases the interviewee may have been conflating American culture with North American culture. In other cases the US may have been raised in lieu of having an immediate answer to a question about Canada, or because Canadian news often features stories derived from the States. Finally, it may simply be a desire to tell an interesting and engaging story. Conflict, which is a common literary and story device, is found in many news stories about atheism coming out of the US. Some interviewees may have intuitively thought that stories from the US were more stimulating, and thus conversation-worthy, than Canadian news stories, if they were even aware of any.

By constructing their atheist identities as situationally different than atheists in the US, interviewees tended to normalize atheism in Canada by relativizing their experiences. While American media is portrayed as hostile, polemic, and divisive, Canadian media is portrayed as relatively balanced and non-sensational. When religion is portrayed as vibrant in the US, religion in Canada comes across as relatively subdued. By extension, if atheists in the US are portrayed as abnormal amongst a normative religious atmosphere, in Canada atheists come across as normal amongst a normatively secular, albeit diverse, atmosphere. In consideration with the findings from the previous chapter, particularly the notion that Canadians are polite and averse to controversy and conflict, it seems clear that the interviewees are not overly concerned

with their situation in Canada. While concern over American influence came up, no one made a claim that that influence has created a troubling anti-atheist atmosphere in Canada, and no one made a claim relating to atheists having it worse off, or even as bad, in Canada as in the States. In fact, the opposite was always the sentiment when a statement of straight comparison was made. Overall, the majority of interviewees were much more concerned about the plight of atheists elsewhere than they were with atheists in Canada, which points to a sense of atheist/theist equality or mutual tolerance in Canada, at least by comparison.

Conflict is, of course, also found in Canadian stories about atheism, but how frequently does atheism conflict with theism in Canada? How often are atheists on the receiving end of discrimination and/or aggression simply because they are atheists? How severe is such discrimination when it does occur? These questions are addressed in the next chapter, which asks each interviewee how frequently they receive negative reactions and responses because they are an atheist.

Chapter Nine: Social Interactions: The Low Frequency of Negative Reactions

I have never been stigmatized or had bad reactions for being an atheist.

– Alison, 26, recent graduate in Sociology

I really don't find that people are that stressed here about religion, like Canada. I don't think, like; if you identify as, you know, Muslim or Catholic or whatever, that people are going to freak out about it. They are just going to accept it and move on, and equally if you are an atheist people aren't going to think you are some sort of immoral pig who should be burned at the stake.

– April, 22, undergraduate student in Classics

In an often cited study from 2006, Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann analyzed “what attitudes about atheists reveal regarding American society and culture.”⁴⁴⁸ They found that:

Atheists are at the top of the list of groups that Americans find problematic in both public and private life, and the gap between acceptance of atheists and acceptance of other racial and religious minorities is large and persistent. It is striking that the rejection of atheists is so much more common than rejection of other stigmatized groups. For example, while rejection of Muslims may have spiked in post-9/11 America, rejection of atheists was higher.⁴⁴⁹

They also noted that to be an atheist in the United States is “not to be one more religious minority among many in a strongly pluralist society. Rather, Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether.”⁴⁵⁰ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith have also noticed this stigma against atheists:

⁴⁴⁸ Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann, “Atheists,” 231.

⁴⁴⁹ Ibid., 230.

⁴⁵⁰ Ibid.

The practice of “coming out” as an atheist has not been simply a matter of publicly claiming atheism along a well-worn, legitimate route. It has involved emerging from invisibility to claim a personal and social identity that has carried a fair degree of stigma.⁴⁵¹

Significantly, they also found that, “[t]his stigma is likely weakening, since even before the emergence of the new atheism, there has been a growth of organizations and activism among secularists attempting to make a place for themselves in American society.”⁴⁵² (25) They also point to the increased popularity of atheism, through a growth in the “circulation of atheist ideas and ideologies,”⁴⁵³ yet the US nonetheless remains “made up of a population in which a significant majority not only considers belief in the supernatural normal and evolution false, but want creationism taught alongside evolution in school.”⁴⁵⁴

The potential or probable weakening of the atheist stigma in the US is interesting, and points to why the authors found that over half of the atheist respondents to their questionnaire about atheism “believed that atheists are still discriminated against, although few could cite incidents where they personally felt such prejudice.”⁴⁵⁵

If the stigma of atheism is weakening in the US, what about the stigma in Canada? Is there such a stigma, and if so, how prevalent is it? The previous chapter demonstrated how the plight of atheists in the US is a concern for some Canadian atheists, and the chapter before that explained how some Canadian atheists were unsure of the plight of atheism in Canada, at least in terms of how understood atheism in Canada is. This chapter asks how often atheists in Ottawa get treated unfairly, are discriminated against, and persecuted simply for being known as atheists. The principle question behind this chapter, which was asked to interviewees from both the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) and non-group-affiliated atheists

⁴⁵¹ Cimino and Smith, “The New,” 25.

⁴⁵² Ibid.

⁴⁵³ Ibid., 37.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid., 34.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid. 31

(NGAA) is: “Have you ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned you were an atheist?” The secondary (follow-up) question is, “How frequent is getting a negative response?”

9.1 Negative Reactions: ACUO

In hindsight, I did not have much of an expectation with regard to how often atheists received negative reactions when others found out they were atheists. I would not have been surprised to hear from the interviewees that they have had negative reactions from religious friends or family members upon their “coming out” to them as atheist. I assumed that some of the members would have joined the ACUO as a means of substitution for these lost or challenging relationships, but I also thought that most of the members would consider a family member or friend’s disapproval of their atheism to be rooted in a *positive* desire to ‘save their soul’ rather than a *negative* perception of them now that they have ‘lost the faith’. While the former was not the case, the later assumption turned out to be accurate. As for reactions from acquaintances and strangers, I had no prior assumptions, but I was nonetheless surprised by the low frequency of receiving a negative reaction as expressed by the interviewees. To aid in exploring how often the ACUO interviewees received negative reactions, and the types of negative reactions they did receive, this section features the testimony of Belinda, Colin, Dan, and Donovan.

9.1.1 Belinda

Belinda is a 22 year-old third-year undergraduate student majoring in Economics. She moved to Ottawa from a major Western Canadian city in 2011 for school. She describes atheism

as being important to her identity. Belinda describes her parents as having no religion while she was growing up, but they both became Buddhist when she was in high school, at which point she was “at least an agnostic if not an atheist” and was not influenced to become Buddhist herself. When she was a child she did believe in God, but she is not sure why, hypothesizing “it was a society thing” and offering that she may have been influenced by a churchgoing friend. By high school she “actually” thought about the existence of God, and “decided there was no evidence.” In hindsight she says she was agnostic for a while, but at the time she did not identify as anything. After reading Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, Belinda began identifying as an atheist and began reading more about atheism. Today the majority of her friends are atheists, and she is an active participant in many ACUO social gatherings.⁴⁵⁶

When I asked Belinda if she had ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned she was an atheist, she replied: “Not that I know of, I don’t think. It’s more neutral, they don’t overly react in a negative way.” When I asked my follow-up question, “How frequent is getting a negative response?” she replied:

Yeah, I need to think about it, if I ever got a negative response. I think it is more usually a surprise. People just are really surprised that I am an atheist. I am not sure if it is just me in particular or [if] they are generally surprised that I’m an atheist. [...] I did have someone say that, to me – someone I worked with – that they were so shocked when they found out I was an atheist. “Oh, you seemed really religious to me.” I am not sure why; I guess because I am, I think particularly at work I am very professional, I never swear or anything. I am really nice and I think they take that as religious. That is sad to me, for sure, not that they think religious people are good, that’s fine, but do they think nonreligious people would be, I don’t know, ‘cruel’ or something all the time?

This notion which Belinda raises of people being ‘surprised’ to find out that their friend, co-worker, or acquaintance is an atheist is a common response among those I interviewed. Likewise, the uncertainty about having had a ‘negative reaction’ – a term left undefined by the

⁴⁵⁶ This biography (from “Belinda is a 22 year-old” to “ACUO social gatherings”) was originally published in Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 117-136, 123.

interviewer – was also common, as was the notion that a negative reaction was infrequent (in this case I interpret the line, “I need to think about it, if I ever got a negative response” as being “infrequent,” although many of the other interviewees were more direct in stating as such).

9.1.2 Colin

Colin grew up in a Southern Ontario town and in his early to mid-twenties did some global traveling and spent about a year in Oceania. He moved to Ottawa three years ago and is currently working in sales. He is 26 years-old. When he was growing up, Colin’s immediate family only went to church on Christmas, although “sometimes” he would “tag along” with a Christian friend to his church and he attended a few Christian summer camps. He says he never believed in Christianity, but, influenced in his later teens by black metal music, he identified with Norse mythology for a period, and later Satanism: “I guess being rebellious I started like reading about Satan and stuff ‘cause he was a cool character too. Like a literary character. Not, not a real character.” By “literary” Colin refers to “*Paradise Lost* and stuff like that,” although he also “looked into LaVey’s Satanism.” He visited graveyards on Halloween and went amateur ghost hunting in a “building where five people died in a fire and it was supposed to be haunted” but he came to the realization that ghosts were not real: “I really wanted to know, like, ‘is this bullshit?’ and that’s for sure the time when I was like, ‘this is defiantly bullshit.’ All of it! Satan, mythology, all this God stuff, and ghosts definitely, definitely ghosts.” He began to identify as an atheist a year or two later, at age 22/23, sparked by an interest in science as well as the writings about religion by Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. Following his backpacking adventure across the globe Colin settled in Ottawa where many of his friends are atheists, a few of which belong to the ACUO.

Colin was a good-humoured interviewee, so the exchange that follows contains a bit of shared humour, and should be read as such. It nonetheless drives home a couple of valuable points on his perception of how often a negative reaction occurs, and how concerning a negative reaction is:

Have you ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned you were an atheist?

Ah, I know I have, I'm just trying to think of a specific time. I try and keep it hush-hush. Like, negative, like immediate negative reaction? Like, I say it and people are, like, running for the hills? Or what, or just like...

Whatever you...

...just like, talking to people, and then they find out, and then... [Laughter]

...you have a horse head in your bed. [Laughter]

[Laughter] Oh, my god... [laughter] ...nothing that severe! Negative like; negative reaction? I guess just people, like, yelling at me. Nothing like, yeah; like arguing really intensely but nothing like: no horse heads! [laughter] Yeah, pretty mild. I don't go into Mosques and just [laughter] shout it out so I kind of keep it hush-hush a bit. I only bring it up when somebody else does. If somebody else... like; even then I don't always bring it up but I won't say, like, "oh, I am an atheist that offends me," or something, but if somebody says something that I think is BS I will challenge them so – even if it is about God – but I won't say, like, "I'm an atheist. I think that's stupid." I will say, "that is stupid because...", but I have never got horse heads or any threats or anything like that. I have heard some terrible stuff from people.

By "terrible stuff" Colin is referring to comments made during impromptu debates with religious people, "[n]ot necessarily like threats against specific people but just things that I have taken to be, ah, dangerous." When asked how frequent a negative response was, the exchange went as follows:

You mean getting a negative reaction about being an atheist?

Yeah. Just from regular life.

Not, not... I, I guess people are pretty accepting in Canada but who knows what they are thinking.

Yeah.

I never had, like, any... [long pause]

You don't feel like the world is discriminating against you? Or, do you?

I do kind of think that society is; I mean it's not: I don't think there needs to be a civil rights movement or anything like that but [laughter] I, I mean, you know I think we are... but it is just not a huge deal. You know, not being, it's not like 'atheist only washrooms' or something like that, so. [laughter]

From this exchange it seems clear that Colin is selective with who he tells he is an atheist, and that he does consider atheism to have some degree of stigma, although not enough to be of serious concern. With regard to being selective when telling someone he is an atheist, Colin is not alone, although there are also members of the ACUO who claimed they were not selective in

whom they would tell. Moreover, there were some who felt that the degree of stigma against atheists in Canada was shrinking, yet no one claimed, or gave any hint of concern, that it was increasing.

9.1.3 Dan

Dan is a 20 year-old third year undergraduate Biology student. He lives just outside of Ottawa, where he has lived with his parents for sixteen years, and commutes to school. Dan was raised Catholic and went to Catholic school from kindergarten through high school. He explained that he accepted being Catholic and participating in Catholic rites of passage because “everyone else was doing it. The parents were happy. The grandparents were happy. It was a celebration of some kind. I had no clue what it was, or what it meant. I went along with it.” He had not put much thought into the differences between Christian religions, but started to study up on those differences as well as many kinds of different religions once he realized in either grade eleven or twelve that people *actually* believed in their religions whereas he had thought of his religion as a type of fairy-tale. He explains, “You know, you have Santa for kids, you have God for adults. That’s the way it was. I discovered that, ‘Holy Crap! – people actually think that’s true?!?!’; and I discovered I don’t believe any of it.” Following that realization he read up on different religions to see where he fit in, and discovered atheism and nonbelief, which he immediately related to: “That’s it. I didn’t consider it. I just accepted it. That’s the way it was. I had no negative connotations to atheism. I didn’t know people had a negative reaction to it. To me it was just one option among so many others, and it fit me.”

Dan is not sure of his dad’s religious orientation because he has never really talked about it “one way or the other,” and he describes religion in his immediate family as his mother going

“to church once or twice a month maybe. We pray before supper you know, Easter, Christmas. Jesus is there but he’s not at the forefront. The way I see it he is more like in the background.” Although he now describes himself as an atheist, a secular humanist, a rational skeptic, and a free thinker, he still occasionally goes to church with his mother because it makes her happy. He joined the ACUO immediately after he stumbled upon their table during Reason Week.

One thing that stood out from Dan’s interview is that his being honest about his beliefs (or lack thereof) and ‘coming out’ as an atheist to his Catholic mother was – and still is – very significant to him. His relationship with his mother on the issue of his religious orientation came up a few times during our interview, including when I asked him if he had ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned he was an atheist:

I haven’t told a lot of people because it has never really come up, you know, Canadian politeness and all. My mother but that’s...

Yeah, that’s pretty...

...She wasn’t thinking about harming me, she wasn’t thinking about being mean to me. I think it was just the way she felt at the time. That it just came out.

Now; do you even talk with her about it, or just, “better left unsaid,” or

Not really. My sister [who is “a very liberal kind of Christian”] is more open about that. We talk sometimes about different issues and stuff, but my mom, not really. If it comes up... she bought the, my dad’s sticker to put on the back of the car, you know, “Keep Christ in Christmas,” and I pointed out and said, “Look mom, the only Christian thing about Christmas is the crèche we have on the side there that nobody really looks at. Everything else is not Christian,” and once I just made sure she knew what it was, there is no need to keep harping on about it. Going to midnight church, so why not? Midnight Mass, sorry. Why not? It makes mom happy; I get a swig of wine.

When asked about telling his parents he is an atheist, Dan explained:

My dad didn’t, I didn’t notice much of a difference. I didn’t act any different at all. I was never forced to go to church. I thought it was boring but that was about it. You know, it makes mom happy, so why not? She said that when I told her that I didn’t believe in God it made her feel as though she failed as a mother. Which I found very weird. At first I was like, I felt sort of like I did something wrong, but then I started thinking about it and the way she was raised, I am pretty sure it’s, “you have to be a believer to be a good person;” but she knows I am not a bad person so I think she’s coming to terms with that. She cautiously asked me a few times if I wanted to go to church with her, to which I replied, “sure, why not?” I don’t hate church. I don’t hate religious people. So, life goes on. Nothing really changes.

Citing a negative family reaction was not uncommon, and Dan’s experience is also fairly common in that it points to an understanding that a family member who exhibits a negative reaction toward one’s confession of atheism is likely doing so out of a concern for his or her

loved one's wellbeing, in this case their conception of the health or status of their loved one's soul. Dan also raised the notion of Canadian politeness. This came up in more than a few of the interviews; Gerard (see 7.1.1), for example, brought up "Canadian politeness" as a reason for why he believes that atheism does not come up very often in the Canadian media.

9.1.4 Donovan

Donovan is a 20 year-old undergraduate majoring in Philosophy. He has lived in Ottawa his entire life. He was raised in a family he describes as not being very religious. His mother was raised Catholic but "sort of just floated off that boat," and considers herself spiritual. He is not really sure what his father's religious beliefs are, although he does recall his father once telling him that "once you realize they're all the same they're all just bullshit." As a child he attended a Catholic church every Sunday with his parents and sibling, but he explains that it was only due to his and his sibling's insistence that his parents took them, and their interest in church was due to their enjoyment of singing in the choir, not because of any religious beliefs; to his parents going to church was a chore. He claims to have never had any friends that were really into religion, although in high school he did have a friend who was an atheist who was a big influence on him; prior to their friendship he had not thought about religion much. He says his "last step" before identifying as an atheist was an experimentation with Norse Mythology because he "wanted to believe in something." He prayed to Norse gods in earnest, even looking up how to properly pray to Thor on the internet. Further conversations with his atheist friend about other religions helped convince him that Norse mythology also "doesn't make any sense at

all,” and when he received no responses to his prayers, his interest in Norse mythology fizzled out.⁴⁵⁷

When asked about whether or not he has ever experienced a negative reaction from someone when they learned he was an atheist, Donovan’s reply was uncommon as he immediately said “Yes” and jumped right into a description of the incident:

Well, I don’t know if it was *exactly* when they learned that I was an atheist, but I... definitely I was at the library with [another ACUO member, Brendon,] and we were ah; sort of a long story, but [Brendon] and I were studying upstairs on the third floor of the computers and then he left his desk for a while cause we needed to go play Frisbee. We came back and his chair got stolen and like, these two Muslim girls across him were; one of them had taken his chair, and like, they were being super loud and annoying the time that he was studying so he left them a note when we decided to move to another part of library. He left them a note saying, like, “you could be more courteous,” or something, “and not be so loud” and then, they made an express thing to show that they ripped the note when we were at the elevators. It was really weird, and it was like, “yeah, okay what’s going on here,” and I think they knew us from something; I’m pretty sure they knew us from, or at least they knew [Brendon] and by association they figured out that I was an atheist as well because like I’m pretty sure they knew us from Islam Awareness Week because it was just recently after that and then what happened was that when we were downstairs in the library, I was going to the washroom and I saw them like all hanging out like huddled together talking and I kind of just looked at them and I was like, “oh that’s weird,” and then I went outside to have a smoke and I was hanging out outside and they all came out and they were like, “what’s your problem with, you, like, with Islam?” They were just like starting this whole thing out of nowhere and like, I hadn’t even talked to them at all, and they were just like, “what’s your problem with Islam and shit, and like – “us and Islam,” that’s what they said, “us and Islam” – and I’m like, “I don’t even have a problem with you; I don’t even know you,” and then, and then they were like... they, and anyways – a few other words were exchanged where they said something like they were talking about Islam and I was like, “okay, well, I don’t have a problem with you but if you want to start talking about Islam...” and I started talking about Islam and then, and then they threatened me – it was really weird, actually; I’ve never had that happen to me before but they threatened me, they were like, “if you and [Brendon] keep going on like this you’d better watch out, there’s going to be a retaliation.”

Wow.

Yeah, that’s what they said to me, like, a bunch of Muslim girls, and I just started fucking yelling, I was like... I just pretty much said, “oh, you’re going to kill me because your magical sky daddy tells you too,” [laughter] and they got like so pissed at that, and they just walked away after that and I was like, “man, that’s so weird that that just happened.” It was; it was weird. I’ve never had that happen but I guess that’s like the most negative reaction I’ve ever had from people learning that I was an atheist.

Although this incident is an example of one time when Donovan experienced a negative reaction that he attributes to his open identification as an atheist, he later hinted that this was a rare occurrence, and that most of the time reactions are nothing to be concerned about:

⁴⁵⁷ This biography (from “Donovan is a 20 year-old” to “mythology fizzled out”) was originally published in Steven Tomlins, “A Common Godlessness: A Snapshot of a Canadian University Club, Why Its Members Joined, and What That Community Means to Them,” in Lori G. Beaman and Steven Tomlins (Eds.), *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts*, (Switzerland: Springer International, 2015), 117-136, 127.

Most of the time, like, I would say the most before that... the most negative reaction I would get would probably be like “oh why are you an atheist?” you know, like it’s not even a big thing, they’re just kind of questioning it and they’re just like, they’re curious or they don’t even know what it means or something like that. Like, I can remember this one time, it was St. Patrick’s [Day], and I was on the bus, and I was like the only sober person on the bus, and this guy comes up to me and he’s like, “hey man, are you in a band or something,” because [of my style], and I’m like “no” and he’s like “hey man are you a Buddhist? I’m a Buddhist,” and I’m like, “no, actually, I’m an atheist,” and he was like, “oh; you should be a Buddhist.” [Laughter] But then this girl across from another seat, she just kind of peeked out and said, “what’s an atheist?” so I went on this big spiel explaining what atheism was and I’ve never had that happen where, like, somebody asked me what atheism was.

Donovan’s initial response to being questioned about having had a negative reaction when someone became aware that he was an atheist was to mention an incident whereby he felt he was treated unfairly. This is atypical, as the majority of responses to questions about receiving a negative reaction sounded more like his latter response, in which he expressed, “it’s not even a big thing.”

9.2 Negative Reactions: NGAA

Since I had been surprised to find that atheists who belonged to the ACUO overwhelmingly felt that getting a negative response from someone when they discovered they were an atheist was ‘infrequent’, I expected the same result with the NGAA interviewees, and that assumption turned out to be correct. The representative interviewees for this section on how often the NGAA interviewees received negative reactions, the frequency of those reactions, as well as the types of negative reactions they did receive, are Derrick, Elissa, Kevin, and Hanna.

9.2.1 Derrick

Derrick is a 22 year-old undergraduate philosophy student who is in his final year. He has lived in Ottawa his entire life. Although he has both a Jewish mother and a Quaker father, Derrick describes his religious background as a “basically Jewish cultural upbringing.” He went to a Jewish school for ten years. On identifying as an atheist Derrick explained:

I don't remember like the day that I said, "I am an atheist." It was more like a way of thinking that I was brought up with which is to be a critical thinker. I don't think I ever remember believing in God as like, 'this being that actually exists and is watching us, like the Biblical God'; I don't think I ever believed in that. But atheism as such, I mean, I became more like attracted to it explicitly through Richard Dawkins, like hearing what he had to say, watching some of his documentaries, and stuff like that. Before then it wasn't that I had believed in God, but I guess... just... atheism as a thing that people identified with as a title became kind of, very popular – I guess when he started writing some of his more incendiary books – so that's when I – it – became more interesting to my attention.

Derrick also attributes the 9/11 World Trade Center attacks, the subsequent War in Iraq, his interest in politics, and punk rock bands like Anti-Flag and Propagandhi as contributing to his self-identification as an atheist.

Derrick's response, when I asked him if he had ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned that he was an atheist is as follows:

I don't know, like, because it's not like I have a religious family, for example, [...] I have had civil discussions with people about like, "well how can you have a sense of morality" or "what guides your decision-making if you don't believe in God?" That sort of thing, so in that sense it's like a negative view, but I don't think that I have ever been like, attacked, for like – verbally or anything, like – for when people find out I am an atheist they just try and like, do what you expect them to, which is have all these arguments, like, "well how come bananas are like, open so easily; and intelligent design," and those sorts of things, like, yeah. I've come into that, and like, "how society is losing its moral foundation," and everything about them, it never really is, is it? And then of course the Christians on the street who are like concerned for you because you are going to Hell, so they want to save your soul. It has never been, like... because I think what the religious people try and do is they try and save you right, so it's never about attacking you, it's about trying to persuade you to come to the light I guess, so I guess I have never interpreted it, while I resent it and I think its paternalistic, like, I never take it as them attacking me because it's just their predictable reaction. From their warped perspective, like, they are trying to help you, I guess.

Well my follow-up is: how frequent is getting a negative response?

I don't know. Not that frequent I guess, because I don't engage. [...] I always encounter views in the media and online and stuff of believers who say things that I find to be offensive or wrong, but I don't engage them so I guess that's why I don't bother with reactions.

As with most other interviewees for this chapter, Derrick's response to the question about negative reactions begins with uncertainty; he is initially uncertain about having had a 'negative reaction' – a term left undefined by the interviewer. He guesses that receiving a negative reaction is infrequent, a sure sign that receiving a negative reaction is not a major (nor perhaps, even a minor) concern for him. In fact, he believes that even when religion comes up in the form of "Christians on the street" it is out of their concern for his soul and not a personal attack.

9.2.2 Elissa

Elissa is a 21 year-old undergraduate student in Health Sciences. She was born in South Asia and moved to Victoria, British Columbia, when she was fourteen. She attended high school in Eastern Ontario and moved to Ottawa for university two years ago. Elissa describes her family as not having “a specific God they believe in but they still think there is a Heaven and Hell,” and both of her sisters go to church. Her dad and her stepmother go to a Catholic church, but she has only ever gone to church “to get a snack [because] they have good food.” When asked if she ever believed in God, Elissa said that she “never did” but growing up she occasionally went with her mom to Buddhist temples just to “get some fresh air” and enjoy nature in a mountain setting. As a child she “was just never really into religion.” In South Asia she would often say that she did not “believe in anything” but she would not often call herself an atheist “because that word kind of has a negative image.” In Canada she fluctuates between telling people she is an atheist and simply explaining that she does not believe in God.

When I asked Elissa if her friends in Canada are atheists she gave an example of a negative reaction which she alluded to later in the interview:

Friends here? I don't think they are religious but when I make a comment saying religious is wrong they got offended. Even if they are not religious at all. Like, none of my roommates are, but two of my Polish friends, they have family events during Easter weekend. Go to church and like show off their egg baskets and that's all they do. They don't really go to church but like one of my Polish friends got offended and I was like, “why are you so offended? You don't even believe in God?” and she is like, “no, you shouldn't criticize religious people because it is their family belief and you are criticizing family.” Which I understand and I think that's why it's taboo more than just what they believe is like family so they are emotionally attached, I guess.

She brought up this incident in the following exchange when I asked her if she had ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned that she was an atheist:

“Yeah, my [friend]. Like I, as I mentioned earlier, when I say there is no God she just got offended right away. I was like, I didn't want to say more, I didn't know what to say. I just walked away. [...] I couldn't convince her. She just got really emotional and got upset. So, I couldn't do it after because I got scared of offending people.”

When I asked Elissa how frequent getting a negative response is she replied:

I haven't tried it for a while. I haven't tried to talk to like religious people, I guess, pretty often if I did try because it would probably get better as I talk more to them if they are willing to talk, because if I tried it once I would be offen[sive] obviously because they have been living like that for a while. If I tried to talk to more and more and let them think, take their time and think about it, and I think they will understand my perspective as well, then just like trying to keep talking to them so like it may take a while for me to convince somebody. I think it is definitely possible if they are willing to listen and be open-minded. It's just hard to find.

I rephrased the question to make it clear that I meant receiving a negative reaction, such as anger, *simply* for being an atheist, *not* for when she actively tried to convince someone to become an atheist:

I don't think they would be like, angry, because I am atheist, I think they will be angry if I tried to talk to them. If I tried to convince and take one out of their group then they will be angry, but if I don't touch them they won't get angry at me I don't think. Once they had Muslim Awareness, they didn't get offended when I said I was an atheist. They were just like, "oh yeah, yeah, going to try hijab?" [And I was] like, "no." They had the hijab try day; "no I don't think so. I like my hair long."

[...]

So just in regular life without trying to convert people [...] do you think people give, like, a negative reaction if you say you are an atheist, or do you ever just say that?

I say that and people don't get offended. I haven't met anybody who gets offended. Maybe old people might. They won't get angry at me but they will be like surprised or like worried that I will tell.

When I asked Elissa again how frequent getting a negative response was (now that I was clear that I meant the times when she was *not* actively trying to 'convert' people) she said: "I haven't got one yet."

From this exchange it seems clear that Elissa is selective with who she tells she is an atheist, and past experiences have taught her to be cautious in who she tries to persuade toward atheism, and/or how she tries to convince them to her way of thinking on religion. It is only when she actively engages with people in order to convert them to atheism that people take offence, and that is something she has not tried "in a while," otherwise she has never had a negative reaction simply for being an atheist.

9.2.3 Kevin

Kevin is a 29 year-old Political Studies Graduate student. He grew up in Southern Ontario and moved to Ottawa about two years ago. He self-describes as both an agnostic and an atheist. Kevin's friends are "all atheists [...] and probably more militant than" he is, although his fiancé is a Christian who "is extremely disappointed in [him] for [his] beliefs." His father "is extremely atheist" and his mother is "emotionally religious," but he does not think "she would ever admit that she believes in God." His father was raised Anglican and his mother's family are Catholic and United Church, although his immediate family is "at least agnostic, and most of them are quiet atheists."

As Kevin grew up his family attended church on Easter and Christmas but were not weekly church-goers. Of his own accord – and his own decision – Kevin became quite active with the United Church around grade eight. He attended church weekly and was proud of his grandfather who would preach at the church, which he attended with his mother and his stepfather. For clarity Kevin explained that he has "a mother and a stepfather and a father and a stepmother [...]o when I am talking about my family and myself attending church it's my mother and my stepfather, and then my stepmother and my father are both confirmed atheists." Although he did not go to Sunday School he was confirmed in that faith. In early high school, "probably grade eight or grade nine" he stopped going to church; it started with him "going less and less and then not at all."

One of the reasons he began to question and doubt his faith was that his best friend asked him "what if you're wrong," and "don't you have any doubt, you know, how can you be sure?" and these questions caused him to "reevaluate" his beliefs. Kevin does not remember the moment that he first self-described as an atheist, contemplating that "it would just have

manifested itself in like increasingly high amounts of skepticism” until he thought, “I really don’t believe this.” He considers his loss of faith to be similar to losing faith in Santa Claus: “It’s not something I am ashamed of that I believed when I was a kid or whatever but I feel like I kind of outgrew it.”

When I asked Kevin if he has ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned he was an atheist he replied:

Generally not. So, my fiancé has been with me for ten years and she pulled the switch because she was an agnostic when I started going out with her. [...] She gets a little distressed if I make it quite clear that I am not going to switch back over, but no, not really. I don’t think I have ever, I think I am quite tactful; I try to be tactful about this with people. So I have attended, since I’ve been an atheist, you know, church services, to see family or participate in family stuff and it doesn’t seem to be, you know, terribly polite for people to ask me what I really believe in. So, I have got on pretty well. I don’t think ever I’ve gotten, you know... people are less enthused with my political beliefs but that has very little to do with my religion so, I’d say the answer is no.

When I asked him how frequent getting a negative response is, Kevin explained:

Well, very seldom as you could say. It’s funny you mention that. I do know other people who are theistic, right? I think when I discuss these things with them I try to put myself on a position to communicate with them. So, I find that my religious upbringing, my background in the Judea/Christian tradition allows me to speak to them on a level that isn’t antagonistic of their entire belief. [...] I don’t tend to get much negative responses and so if someone asks me a specific question about religion I can say, well, I can say, like, “judge not lest you are judged.” I can sort of discuss on that level so I don’t get a negative reaction, but that is probably because I don’t really engage strictly on my laurels all the time.

To Kevin receiving a negative reaction from someone when they realized he was an atheist is “very seldom.” He thinks that it is impolite to be asked what he believes in, but when he does engage with believers he speaks to them on their ‘level’, even quoting scripture to get his points across (he specifically mentioned the Biblical passages, “judge not lest you are judged” and “vengeance is mine saith the Lord.”⁴⁵⁸) His atheism seems to be a minor issue in his relationship with his partner, but not of a serious enough concern to break off their engagement.

⁴⁵⁸ I’m quoting Kevin but the original verses are (translations from the King James Version) Matthew 7:1 (“Judge not, that ye be not judged”) and Romans 12:19 (“Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord”).

9.2.4 Hanna

Hanna is 23 years-old and a fourth-year undergraduate student in History. She has lived in South America and Eastern Canada but grew up primarily in a small Ontario town. She has been living in Ottawa for three years. Hanna describes her family as “spiritual, very Eastern,” although growing up they did attend a Unitarian Church: “I didn’t know it was a church until I studied it in [a] class two years ago. Like, I had no idea it was related to Christian doctrine at all, other than the lighting of the chalice and stuff.” Her stepfather is Christian and says grace before dinner, which reminds her of how she grew up “saying Bob Dylan quotes” before dinner.

Hanna describes the Unitarian Church as a community that was “very politicized” with “a lot of very liberal social policy.” As an example of this Hanna explained how they taught her and her peers about sex by taking them on a field trip to two sex shops in Toronto: “there is a way to clear out a sex shop, is to bring in like seven 13 year-olds on a field trip, but yeah, and they showed us all that stuff so it was huge about, like, I don’t... like, very liberal values.” Hanna stopped going to this church after she became “really disillusioned with the quality of the music that was going on at the church,” and after she was 14 years-old she “wasn’t part” of the community anymore.

When I asked Hanna if she ever believed in God she said, “No, it was never on the radar actually, which is quite cool [...] that concept of a supreme deity was never something that really bugged me.” She does not remember talking about religion before the age of 8, but she recalls identifying as spiritual for a period after she was 14, at a time when she became interested that many people from her community believed in “this thing called God, and that’s probably when I started sort of thinking about it a little bit more. It was never something that made any sort of sense to me.” By the time she moved to the East Coast for university she was openly identifying

as an atheist, but she has recently “mellowed” on her use of the descriptor ‘atheist’ because she found that using that term would “shut down conversations.”

When I asked Hanna if she has ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned she was an atheist, she replied: “Oh, for sure! Definitely loads. I mean all the ‘conversion’ times. I very legitimately have many friends at home who are praying for my soul on a regular basis because they think I am going to Hell. In [my small Ontario hometown] and in [South America] too.” Bringing the focus to the Canadian context, she explained that her friends were “[h]ugely negative, constantly to me, so I don’t engage with it anymore.” I told Hanna that it is interesting that her negative reactions seem to come from her social group as opposed to strangers, to which she explained:

I find it quite complementary actually that within their way of looking at the world they care about me – they are actually legitimately concerned that I am going to Hell – and I’m going, ‘well, that is a little ridiculous from my frame of reference.’ I am not going to say that – like definitely not. [...] I think it is also – it’s a big question in Canadian society: do we choose to live with our differences or do we want to, like... I feel it’s almost people in atheism have like the conversion strategy of a Christian paradigm, right? They will pull that over into atheism and I go, “no, that’s not... I am not doing that.” That’s what I am saying over and over again. Also to other atheists who are like, “how can you still be friends with people who, yeah, have such a different way of seeing the world?” What does it mean to be a basically good person? I don’t think it has anything to do with belief, so. I do get pissed off, and I will get offended now if people are completely dismissive initially. I’ll kind of go, “you don’t know who I am,” and I will say it with a smile and they will say it firmly and just be like, “you don’t know what you are talking about.”

When I asked her how frequent getting a negative response or reaction from someone is when they find out that she is an atheist, Hanna replied:

I really try not to talk about it, so. Considering my active attempts to avoid the subject it is amazingly often. If I would say to somebody, I would more... if they asked me what I believed in, and I respond “atheist,” more often than not I anticipate a negative reaction from them. So I think that says something. But that’s not very much quantity of, sorry.

No, but it is interesting.

But, I do wonder about being a girl and I think that might add to it because they’re not used to, I don’t think we are quite as used to girls taking the hard line, and atheism in Canada right now is a bit of a hard line, because I decided to take... and I am still once in a while squeamish about, like; rather than saying you are spiritual or saying that you disagree but you are not sure, whatever, like noncommittal or agnostic or something like, I do think there is still a bit of a resistance against that and about women as well.

Hanna’s answer to the question being addressed in this section is atypical in that she was quick to express that she has “definitely” received “loads” of negative reactions (although she

later acknowledged a lack of “quantity,” presumably with regard to the frequency of receiving negative reactions). The negative reactions she mentioned primarily came from friends and family. Although she acknowledges these reactions, she does not consider them to be “a big deal” or “an issue,” instead viewing it as a sign that they care about her, that they are concerned for her soul. Although her examples of receiving negative reactions revolve around friends and family, she does add an interesting opinion about society’s acceptance of atheism, arguing that it may be less acceptable for women to be atheist (which she considers a “hard line” or aggressive/assertive) than it is for men. Although this is anecdotal, it is worth consideration, especially since there is a gender discrepancy when it comes to self-identifying as an atheist, with men more statistically likely to do so than women.

9.3 Discussion

The phrases ‘negative reaction’ and ‘negative response’ were left undefined in the main question pertaining to this section, “Have you ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned you were an atheist?” as well as its follow-up, “How frequent is getting a negative response?” The use of the word “someone” was also used specifically so as to leave the interpretation open; the question could have been, and was, answered with regard to close friends, close and distant family members, acquaintances, and strangers. The predominant theme that emerged is that the majority of interviewees expressed that receiving a negative reaction to their atheism, or having been the recipient of negative experiences related to being an atheist, was infrequent. There are no distinguishable differences between the ACUO and the NGAA interviewees. Of the forty interviewees, thirty-three gave answers which point to the reception of a negative reaction being an infrequent occurrence; five interviewees answered that receiving a

negative response from someone when they learned said interviewee was an atheist was a frequent occurrence, and two did not answer the question in a way that is easy to categorize.⁴⁵⁹

Table 9: Negative responses to atheism

“How frequent is getting a negative response [from someone when they learned you were an atheist?]”	Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO)	Non-Group-Affiliated Atheists (NGAA)	All Interviewees (ACUO) and NGAA)
Frequent	3	2	5
Infrequent	16	17	33
Difficult to Categorize	1	1	2

Although some of the interviewees mentioned one or more family member reacting negatively to their pronouncement of being an atheist, they commonly reflected on the point that those family members cared for them, thus the negativity was considered as having come from a positive place: a concern for their future (i.e. post-physical-death) wellbeing. Although most did not articulate those negative reactions as being particularly problematic, at least with regard to continued relations, there were two exceptions that stood out. Ashley (6.2.4) and Ian (6.33) both expressed their ‘coming out’ as atheists in terms that point to a detriment to their relationships with their parents. It is worth noting that the parents of one of them (Ian) live in the US.

As for acquaintances and strangers reacting negatively, there were many examples, but those were downplayed upon reflection, usually presented as the other person expressing confusion, surprise, curiosity, or a desire to save their soul. The confusion and/or surprise

⁴⁵⁹ The two difficult to categorize answers came from Dan and George. Dan had not told many people that he was an atheist because it “has never really come up,” and George answered with a mixed message, probably because, as he explained, he does not “bring it up a lot.” For a sense of how I came to categorize the interviewees see Appendix XII, which contains a table that features select quotations from each interviewee on the theme of negative responses to atheism.

usually came from the acquaintance or stranger's lack of understanding of what an atheist was, in conjunction with their realization that someone they know or just met was an atheist but otherwise seemed like a morally sound individual. In other words, the negative reactions were often perceived as being based on a misunderstanding of who an atheist is or what an atheist believes. In one sense such a reaction may have a positive side to it, the religious person initially sees the good in the atheist and is on the receiving end of a learning experience, on the other hand the notion of having to explain why or how one can be both 'good' and an 'atheist' shows a bigotry toward atheists from certain religious individuals and/or within some religious circles.

Cases of outright experiences of discrimination were not reported by interviewees, and the discrimination of atheists in Canada did not come across as a major, or even a minor, concern. A common response was that one's atheism does not come up in many conversations because religion does not come up very often. This latter point was explained by some interviewees through an allusion to Canadian culture being polite or generally non-confrontational, part of a "live and let live," (as Brian suggests, 7.2.1), attitude to cohabitation. Related to this notion – that of "Canadian politeness," as Dan (9.1.3) phrased it, is that many of the interviewees expressed what can be described as a sense of attuned self-censorship. This self-censorship came across as nonchalant, as opposed to forced, as if avoiding the topic of religion with acquaintances and strangers was part of an unspoken social contract. Colin (9.1.2), for example, does not discuss atheism (or religion, assumedly) unless someone else raises it as a topic; George (8.4.4) does not bring up his atheism very often because he does not want to offend anyone; Elissa (9.2.2) is selective with who she tells she is an atheist; and Kevin (9.2.3) thinks being asked what about one's religious beliefs is impolite – when he does discuss religion

with non-atheists he makes an effort to engage with them on their level, as opposed to coming across as arrogant or aggressive.

The notion of a stigma (usually undefined) against atheists did come up, albeit rarely, and when it did it was in the context of how the interviewee thought religious people considered atheists rather than from any specific examples of being subjected to that stigma (with the exception of Donovan, (9.1.4) who expressed that he was once verbally attacked because he was an atheist). That some people were surprised that an atheist can be a good person does, however, point to the reality of a stigma. In fact, it must be noted that an unspoken or implicit stigma may be systemic amongst some, perhaps even a majority, of the population.

Will M. Gervais, Ara Norenzayan, and Azim F. Shariff have studied the distrust of atheists from a psychological perspective in which they explained how “atheist distrust generalized to more liberal locales [than in the United States] by utilizing Canadian university samples.”⁴⁶⁰ Their university samples consisted of one hundred and five University of British Columbia undergraduate students. Their six studies found that:

A description of a criminally untrustworthy individual was seen as comparably representative of atheists and rapists but not representative of Christians, Muslims, Jewish people, feminists, or homosexuals (Studies 2–4). In addition, results were consistent with the hypothesis that the relationship between belief in God and atheist distrust was fully mediated by the belief that people behave better if they feel that God is watching them (Study 4). In implicit measures, participants strongly associated atheists with distrust, and belief in God was more strongly associated with implicit distrust of atheists than with implicit dislike of atheists (Study 5). Finally, atheists were systematically socially excluded only in high-trust domains; belief in God, but not authoritarianism, predicted this discriminatory decision-making against atheists in high trust domains (Study 6).⁴⁶¹

Participants were given descriptions of untrustworthy people (such as someone who will steal when no one is looking) and asked to choose who those people are likely to be. For example, one study asked if a hypothetical fellow who committed insurance fraud and theft was most

⁴⁶⁰ Will M. Gervais, Ara Norenzayan, and Azim F. Shariff, 2011, “Do you believe in atheists? Distrust is central to anti-atheist prejudice.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* (101)6: 1189-1206, 1192.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 1189.

likely to be, a) a teacher, or b) a teacher and either a Christian, a Muslim, a rapist, or an atheist (these last four descriptors were manipulated between subjects).⁴⁶² This study found that:

a description of an untrustworthy person is not viewed as representative of religious individuals, be they Christian or Muslim. On the other hand, this description – of an individual who commits insurance fraud and steals money when the chances of detection are minimal – was only seen as representative of atheists and rapists, and people did not significantly differentiate atheists from rapists.⁴⁶³

In another study, this one about who would be a better person to hire for low trust and high trust jobs, they found that “participants significantly preferred the religious candidate to the atheist candidate for a high-trust job (as a daycare worker),” and they “marginally preferred the atheist candidate to the religious candidate for a low-trust job (as a waitress).”⁴⁶⁴ Although this discrimination was predicted by belief in God they also found that, overall, “distrust of atheists was even present among religiously unaffiliated individuals.”⁴⁶⁵ Since this study was conducted in one of the least religious areas of Canada at a secular university it can be assumed, as the authors explain, that “distrust of atheists is likely even more pronounced in more typically religious areas.”⁴⁶⁶

Although it is difficult to speculate on how this study applies to discrimination in practice (i.e. in Canada employers are not legally allowed to discriminate based on religion and, I assume, most employees do not ask what a prospective employee’s religion is⁴⁶⁷) it certainly points to an undertone of discrimination or stigma against atheists from the general public, at least in comparison with those of religious demarcations. This discrimination does not seem to be as visibly pronounced as in the United States, particularly in terms of being institutionalized (i.e. legal ability to run for public office), although it should still be of concern to atheists, particularly

⁴⁶² Ibid., 1195.

⁴⁶³ Ibid., 1196.

⁴⁶⁴ Ibid., 1200.

⁴⁶⁵ Ibid., 1194.

⁴⁶⁶ Ibid., 1201

⁴⁶⁷ On the other hand, there is nothing to stop employers from looking up a potential employee’s online footprint.

those in the job market. An impromptu question I asked those I interviewed from the ACUO who had elected positions, such as President or Vice President, was if they included those positions on their resumes. One said he did because he considered it to show experience, but he uses the acronym 'ACUO' rather than spelling out that it's an atheist club to potential employers. The other two were unsure if they will add it to their resumes, with one explaining that it would depend on the job. They both expressed that it would show leadership and volunteer work, but it would also raise the possibility of being discriminated against. This shows that, although my samples were similar to those of Cimino and Smith's in that few of those questioned could cite actual incidents of personally feeling prejudiced against, at least some of them were concerned with implicit discrimination.

9.4 Conclusion

When asked how frequently they received a negative response from someone when they learned that they were an atheist, the overwhelming majority of interviewees from both the ACUO and the NGAA answered in terms that can accurately be described as 'infrequent'. Although the majority of interviewees reported receiving a negative reaction as infrequent, most did mention at least one example of having had experienced a negative reaction due to their identifying as atheist. The most common of these negative reactions included a family member feeling disappointed and/or concerned, and having felt stigmatized by strangers and friends. In the case of a family member such as a parent expressing disappointment, with two notable exceptions, Ashley (6.2.4) and Ian (6.33), their relationships did not suffer any serious long-term consequences. Even if concern over their relationship with the divine and destined afterlife remained, for most family members the disappointment, or at least the expression of

disappointment, seemed to be temporary and relationships eventually regained a sense of normalcy.

Upon reflection, most interviewees who had felt stigmatized at one time or another by strangers such as street preachers or close friends believed that the stigma was related to a concern for their soul, and by extension for their wellbeing. No one mentioned any severely disconcerting incidents such as losing a job over revealing their atheism. The one interviewee (Donovan, 9.1.4) who expressed the most serious negative reaction, receiving verbal threats, subsequently acknowledged that such a reaction was infrequent. Although this paints a much more positive picture than does the study by Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann which found that atheists in the US often faced rejection, there did remain a sense amongst some interviewees that an implicit stigma may exist in Canada, at least amongst some of the population.

The way that some of the ACUO members who held leadership positions responded to being asked if they would cite their leadership experience on their resumes shows some evidence of this. One was uncertain, another said it would depend on the circumstances of the job, and a third said he already includes it but he uses the club's acronym instead of its full title in order to dissipate the potential for employment discrimination. Research conducted by Gervais, Norenzayan, and Shariff does point to an implicit stigma against atheists in Canada when it comes to trust, so the pause for concern of these members regarding including engagement in an atheist community on their resumes is not without justification. Moreover, many of the interviewees reported that they purposely avoid mentioning their atheism in specific circumstances; they consciously self-censor so as to avoid causing offense when religion arises in some conversations.

The notion of attuned self-censorship, in terms of an atheist choosing not to talk about religion unless someone else raises the subject, must work both ways in order for religion not to come up as a topic of discussion. It seems, at least from these interviewees' experiences, that this was the case: other people did not bring religion or atheism up very often, and when they did it was considered impolite, a means of potentially causing offense. Moreover, when the interviewees discussed examples of receiving negative reactions, they would often add sentiments such as "it is just not a huge deal" (Colin, 91.2), it's not "an issue" (Hanna, 9.1.2), "it's really not a big deal" (Sylvia, 5.2.3), "it's not even a big thing," (Donovan 9.1.4), and "it's never about attacking *you*" (Derrick, 9.21, emphasis added). On this last point, Derrick is referring to an attack on atheism, by a stranger on a street corner, for example, as not being a personal attack, but rather, a criticism of his ideas or beliefs. In other words, while the interviewees tended to see those critical of atheism as misinformed, they also tended to view those people in much the same way they would like themselves to be understood: as critical of an ideology, a belief, or a set of beliefs, but not as making a personal attack on an individual who holds that ideology, that belief, or that set of beliefs. This is consistent with how the ACUO understood their criticisms of Islam and Christianity while the club was active; it also came out in many interviews in response to being asked why some people may react negatively to atheism. Donovan inadvertently sums this point up when he said, referring to how he got into an argument with some Muslims, "I don't have a problem with *you*, but if you want to start talking about Islam..." (emphasis added).

Since atheists often claim to distinguish between one's religion and one's personhood, and by extension between one's irreligion and one's personhood, we can infer that being an atheist is considered by Canadian atheists as one identity trait amongst many. In other words, since

atheists see religious identity as an ideology that can change, it follows that one's religiosity or irreligiosity is not considered an *essential* element of a person, but rather, an element of a person that varies in terms of importance to different individuals. While the importance of atheism to one's identity may differ from person to person, atheists can nonetheless distinguish an attack on atheism from an attack on them personally. This seems to be the case with these interviewees, and it is consistent with how they consider the religious beliefs of those with whom they disagree.

The notions that religion does not come up very often, and that atheists self-censor depending on circumstances, both speak to the concept of not wanting to cause offence. This raises an interesting question, one of which I do not know the answer: "Is this unique to conversations between those who do not have outward, visible religious traits, such as wearing religiously symbolic clothing, or is it a widespread phenomenon that Canadians in general do not discuss religion very often, for fear of causing offence?" Another question it raises is: "does avoiding discussing differences with acquaintances in a diverse society benefit social cohesion?" From the perspective of those I interviewed it would seem that it does, at least in the sense of minimising their own potential to be on the receiving end of negativity. On the other hand, many interviewees also acknowledged having friendships with religious people, and those friendships can be assumed to have had a major influencing effect on how theists and atheists see each other. After all, even if friends avoid discussing contentious issues, such as religion, they still get to know each other as people and not 'just' as representatives of a particular religious viewpoint with societally-defined demarcations.

Chapter Ten: Conclusions

We're so multicultural, that, like, atheism is just like another thing, is just one other thing to add to the whole pot, and it's like, "that's okay you're doing your thing; all these other motherfuckers are doing their thing so it's all good, whatever; we're all doing a different thing so it doesn't matter."

– Donovan, 20, undergraduate student in Philosophy

I don't think we need to advertise the fact that we are atheists. We are allowed to be atheists and no one really judges us for it unless they're, well, that's not true – but like, it's not; we are not publicly shamed, I guess.

– Tracey, 21, undergraduate student in Sociology

10.1 Summaries and Significant Findings

Chapter one introduced the topic of this thesis, as well as the driving question behind it: “How do atheists construct their identities in the context of a religiously diverse Canada?” It explained the development of the thesis in terms of its subject matter and its focus, before explaining its scope, common terminology related to the study of atheism, and where it fits within the sociological research on atheism in the West generally and in Canada specifically. It concluded with a discussion about the structure and organization of the thesis.

Chapter two explored the role of atheism both historically and in contemporary Canada. Its purpose was to offer context for the chapters that follow, as well as to provide scholars with a historical overview of atheism in Canada, something which has, up to now, been absent from sociological scholarship.⁴⁶⁸ It explained that at the time of Canada's initial Constitution (1867)

⁴⁶⁸ Surprisingly, especially considering the growth of ‘religious nones’ in the West in general, the Canadian Edition of the Oxford published textbook, *World Religions Today*, (John L. Esposito, Darrell J. Fasching, Todd Lewis, and Paul Bowlby, *World Religions Today*, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2009) does not mention/acknowledge ‘atheism’, ‘atheist’, ‘religious nones’, ‘nones’, or any other such related nonreligious term in their Index.

there was political ‘will’ behind the notion of religious tolerance, but that will was primarily limited to those of different ‘Christian faiths’ from two ethnic and cultural backgrounds (French Catholics; English Protestants) who viewed those ‘faiths’ or Christian denominations as we, today, colloquially view different ‘religions’. Tolerance did not extend to atheists, in that the blasphemy law outlawed the expression of atheistic opinions and was used until 1936, (it still remains in the Criminal Code). Prior to 1963 the granting of citizenship to self-proclaimed atheists was not a public issue and does not seem to have been controversial, but due to the widely publicized case of Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma, who were initially denied citizenship, in 1965 atheists were legally granted the right to become citizens, and that decision had widespread public support. The sustained practice of religion in public institutions, however, continued to speak to an imbalance of treatment in favour of the majority Christian population.

Since the late 1980’s, Prayer in public schools and town councils, as well as the distribution of Bibles in public schools and the presence of religious symbols in governmental arenas, were, and continue to be, challenged by atheists. While atheists in these cases have had both legal successes and failures, they have also had their allegiances to nation, culture, and heritage questioned in media and court as interested parties rearticulate religious elements and symbols as national and cultural. In other words, religious symbols like the cross have been presented as devoid of religious meaning but full of historical meaning, which paints atheists who challenge religious symbols in courtrooms, for example, as being anti-cultural and anti-heritage.

This chapter also included a contemporary media discourse analysis that highlighted how atheism is currently being discussed in the Canadian media. It explained how atheism was often misinterpreted, misunderstood, and criticized by career reporters, but it also showed how atheists

are increasingly able to – and invited to – contribute publicly to discussions about atheism and religion, in those same national media forums. It concluded with a brief discussion on multiculturalism as the Canadian response to the country's increasingly diverse demography and how this post-World War II national identity may include religiosities in addition to ethnicities, and argued that if so, atheism, as an (ir)religious orientation, may be included under its umbrella as a form of legitimate expression of 'culture'.

Chapter three explained the theoretical and methodological approaches for the chapters which followed. It began by highlighting the importance of studying atheism in Canada, particularly as the treatment of atheists or atheism speaks to the navigation of religious difference in a diverse, pluralistic setting, but also because atheism is a barometer for theism, and atheists are discriminated against in many countries, including Canada's closest neighbour and trading partner.

Since this thesis is concerned with how atheist *individuals* conceive of atheism in Canada, it utilized a lived religion theoretical approach, re-applying it as 'lived atheism'. The purpose of this was to gain a sense of what the individual members think rather than rely on the top-down opinions of club leaders or group spokespersons. Findings were considered in terms of, and in relation to, identity discourse, particularly studies on identity pertaining to atheist organizations in America and the United Kingdom. The methodological approach consisted of participant-observation ethnography in order to gain a contextual understanding of the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO) as a collective identity, and life history interviews with 20 of the community's most active members, which aided in the exploration of the individual demographics, histories, and opinions of each active member. This chapter also explained how life history interviews were conducted with 20 Ottawa-area atheists who do not

actively belong to any atheist communities, referred to throughout the remainder of this thesis as ‘non-group-affiliated atheists’ (NGAA).

Chapter four focused on the ACUO. It began with brief discussions on the club’s locational context, founding, and historical lifespan. It then explained and analysed the main events and controversies of which the club was involved. The main events consisted of two interfaith dialogue debates (“Does God Exist?” and “Founders of Religions”), a debate on the topic of abortion (“Should physicians provide, or refer for, abortion”), and Reason Week, a week-long event ostensibly meant to promote outreach and disseminate information on atheism. The latter event turned controversial by the final day with a Muslim tearing down a poster that questioned Muhammad’s sanity, and the other main controversy the club faced pertained to displaying a ‘stick-figure’ drawing of Muhammad on a laptop in a public setting.

This chapter found that, unlike some of the American atheist organizations studied, the ACUO was not collectively (nor, to my knowledge, individually) interested in the replication, or the replacement of religious (i.e. Christian) holidays and life transition rituals or practices. They were, however, similar to those American organizations in terms of constructing their collective identity through their public discourse, and that often included criticism of religion. While no religion was off-topic, Christianity and Islam received the most criticism. Islam was criticized in relation to the ACUO’s value of free expression; in recent years the depiction of Muhammad has been used as a symbol of Western solidarity in support of free speech, with proponents arguing that criticizing Islam through art or image is often censored in a way that criticizing other religions is not. Moreover, high profile media reports of terrorist-related activities and individuals contributed to their narrative that Islam, as an ideology, is potentially dangerous. Christianity was also criticized during the interfaith dialogue debates and Reason Week, and

during the abortion debate there was an assumption that being pro-life is akin to being Christian, and being an atheist is akin to being pro-choice. That became particularly evident when a member of the ACUO asked the pro-life speaker to elaborate on her religious beliefs, something which she had not alluded to throughout the rest of the debate. Countering campus pro-life ads with ACUO pro-choice posters also served to construct the club's collective identity as one of opposition to an 'other'.

Significantly, it was the club's internal debate on its identity following Reason Week that seems to have led to its eventual demise. Some members wanted to remain publically critical of religion while others preferred a more tolerant public persona focussed on educating about atheism, and others preferred that the club focus on its socialization aspects (i.e. meeting at a bar) over public engagement. Without unanimous agreement and with dwindling passion for future public events the 'socialization' side seems to have won out, and without having public projects to collectively work on and bond over, members simply began meeting as friends without the need for the ACUO to act as facilitator (i.e. they could just text each other).

Chapter five provided interviewee demographics and then analyzed the process by which the interviewees came to self-identify as atheists. It did so through four short biographies from four representative members of each group, the ACUO, followed by the NGAA. This was also the method in which the subsequent four chapters based on interviews from those two groups were presented in order to highlight their (occasional) differences and (mostly) similarities of opinions.

The overwhelming majority of both the ACUO members and the NGAA described coming to self-identify as atheist through a gradual process which often took years, rather than through a sudden de-conversion experience or the sole influence of a singular life event. Many

from both groups of interviewees expressed how they began to question their familial religions between elementary school age and first attending university. Common influences included parents, friends, education, a personal tragedy or misfortune, and associating the ‘lie’ of Santa Claus’s existence with the existence of Jesus/God. The differences between these two groups in terms of overall process were not significant, while the similarities certainly were. Interestingly, most interviewees identified to the left politically before identifying as atheist, meaning that they did not have to adjust their political, social, and moral leanings to reflect a new (ir)religious disposition.

Chapter six asked why some Canadian atheists (in this case members of the ACUO) decide to join atheist communities and why some Canadian atheists do not join atheist communities (NGAA). Reasons were compared with research that speaks to why active American atheists join atheist communities.

Unlike the American cases referenced in that chapter, no interviewee from the ACUO mentioned being overly concerned with the status of atheism in Canada, nor did they express a desire to develop more positive atheist identities through a club. Members instead stressed the social aspects of the club; most interviewees simply wanted to meet like-minded people in a safe-place where they could engage freely in conversations about controversial issues pertaining to religion and scepticism without causing offense to others.

The majority of those from the NGAA explained that they do not belong to an atheist community because they simply felt no need for such a group. A few had considered joining an active atheist community, and two had previously belonged to such a community, but overall atheism was not conceived of as an aspect of their identity that they felt needed reinforcement, nor did they express a desire, want, or need, to meet with other atheists.

Chapter seven analysed how ACUO and NGAA interviewees perceive atheism in Canada when asked how they thought atheism was perceived by others. The main interview question behind this chapter was, “Do you think atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?”

The majority of both the ACUO members who were interviewed and interviewees from the NGAA were initially uncertain as to how well the Canadian public and the media understand atheism, and most came to the conclusion that neither the public nor the media in Canada understood atheism very well. In this respect both groups were relatively similar. Some interviewees were concerned that the New Atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, were portrayed by the media as spokespersons for all atheists, while others could not recall ever seeing the topic of atheism raised in Canadian media. This perceived lack of media interest came across as a straightforward point of fact rather than a concern. One theme that emerged from this chapter was that of interviewees answering the initial question by talking about the United States (US).

Chapter eight addressed how and why the topic of atheism in the US was brought up unprompted in interviews with members of the ACUO and the NGAA. Both groups brought up the state of religion and atheism in the US quite often, although members of the ACUO did so with slightly more frequency than did those who do not belong to any active atheist communities.

When raising the US many interviewees from both groups did so to highlight differences between Canada and the US, with the plight of atheists in the US being perceived more negatively than that of atheists in Canada. Many interviewees were also familiar with American media as well as surveys and basic statistics on atheism in the US, whereas they were less certain, or unaware, of issues and statistics on atheism in Canada. When interviewees did not

raise the US for comparative purposes with Canada, they seemed to conflate a question about atheism in Canada with atheism in North America; other times they seem to have raised the US in lieu of having an immediate answer specifically pertaining to Canada. Overall this chapter shows that many interviewees from both groups seemed more concerned with, and/or knowledgeable about atheism in the US than atheism in Canada, and they can be viewed as constructing their atheist identities in opposition to their perception of the negative American atheist experience.

Chapter nine asked interviewees how frequent it was to receive a negative response when someone learned that they were an atheist. It was based primarily on responses to two questions: “Have you ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned you were an atheist,” and, the follow up, “How frequent is getting a negative response?”

The overwhelming majority of interviewees from both the ACUO and the NGAA answered these questions in terms which explain that receiving a negative reaction was infrequent. There was no significant difference between these two groups in terms of the infrequency of receiving a negative reaction as well as in explanations about experiences when they did receive a negative reaction. While most felt such experiences were infrequent, most did acknowledge experiencing at least one negative reaction or response from someone when they learned that he or she was an atheist. The most common negative reaction cited was from a ‘disappointed’ family member, primarily a parent, but most acknowledged that those relationships went back to normal shortly thereafter. In other words, a loved one may have expressed initial disappointment, but it was not something that irreconcilably strained their relationship. Feeling stigmatized by strangers and friends also came up, although those were usually acknowledged as a concern for their soul’s wellbeing rather than a malicious attack on

them personally, or on atheism in general. No one mentioned any serious incidents of discrimination, such as a loss of employment or a physical assault, and only one interviewee felt he was once the victim of verbal threats, which he explained was rare. Overall, interviewees felt that atheism and religion does not come up very often in conversations because Canadians are polite and averse to controversy, and since atheists do not have any outward religious traits they can choose when and to whom they wish to raise the topic of their being atheists, or avoid it altogether.

10.2 Atheist Identity in Ottawa: Final Considerations

The people who I interviewed did not express experiencing any real, or seriously disconcerting, life impacting, difficulties living as atheists in Ottawa. While most had experienced an incident where they felt stigmatized to one degree or another, those incidents were never considered infringements on their rights or detrimental to their quality of life. Rather, they usually pertained to their close relationships, the majority of which seemed to work themselves out over time.

Although some atheists identified with New Atheism, in terms of acknowledging their influence on their own journey toward self-identification as an atheist, or in influencing contemporary atheism in general, most were critical of and distanced themselves from the tone and abrasive persona of the New Atheists. In other words, they did not want to be associated with the polemical, divisive rhetoric of celebrity atheists such as Richard Dawkins, favouring instead a 'live and let live' attitude or approach to religious diversity. They simply live their lives unassumingly as atheists and their atheism has not posed any serious challenges and

conflicts, besides the aforementioned occasional, and usually fleeting, tension in close, often familial, relationships.

One of the most interesting findings of this thesis is that many of the atheists I interviewed who belonged to an atheist community said that they had joined that community because they wanted a safe space to meet like-minded people with whom they could discuss religion freely and openly without causing offense to anyone. They often had religious friends with whom they chose not to discuss religion in order to avoid causing offense. The community provided an outlet for discussing and debating controversial topics. Atheists joining an atheist community to avoid causing offense seems quintessentially Canadian, and it is a finding that is unique to the study of atheist communities, particularly those from the United States of America where atheists are often written about as joining atheist communities to ‘push back’ against a perceived societal normative religiosity in order to create space for themselves. In fact, when interviewees did bring up what can be referred to as a ‘perceived societal normative religiosity’, it was usually with regard to how they viewed religion and atheism in the States. While religion in Canada did occasionally come up as problematic or too public, Canada was more often than not described as being secular or nonreligious, especially in comparison to other countries.

The notion that religion does not come up in ‘polite company’ was often raised by interviewees. From this perspective, Canadian social etiquette dictates that controversial subjects, such as religion and politics, are not to be raised with strangers, acquaintances, or co-workers. Yet this ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ societal norm, as the interviewees perceived it, was spoken of in positive terms. By avoiding controversial topics the potential for offense and conflict are minimized. Perhaps this also speaks to an assumption that the trait of religious or irreligious identity is less important than other identity traits; yet it could point to the exact

opposite, that one's religious or irreligious identity is such an important part of one's identity that it is best to avoid discussing rather than risk causing divisions between associates. From the perspective of most of those I interviewed, it would seem that both of the above possibilities are correct to varying degrees. Atheists tend to see religion as an ideology, something that contributes to one's identity but also something that can be changed, and, as such, is not essential to who one 'is'. Yet they also tend to perceive religious people as feeling deeply connected to their religions, and as such they view religious people as often conflating the questioning of their religion (understood in terms of an ideology) with questioning them as individuals (i.e. as an attack on their personhood).

While being an atheist was certainly a factor in the construction of each interviewee's identity, it would be misleading to claim that it came across as the most important identification trait in their lives – no one made such a claim. A few, however, expressed the opposite – that being an atheist was not especially important to them. This was the case with most interviewees who did not belong to an atheist community as well as those who did, the latter often stressing that the atheist community was a good 'fit' for them in terms of a lack of other relatable university groups on campus, and a place for socializing and discussion, rather than something that fulfilled a 'need' to express atheism. Many of those who joined because they were passionate about atheism later (during their interview or in conversation after the group ceased to exist) expressed that their passion for the topic had since waned. Some saw Canadian society, or at least considered their experiences of Canadian society, as being primarily secular and non-religious in daily life. As such they did not perceive their atheism as being anything unique, special, or overtly controversial. Most interviewees felt that the Canadian public and the media did not understand atheism because it is not commonly reported on or discussed; the positive

side of this being that the Canadian media is not contributing to the stigmatization of atheists. Simply put, the forty Ottawa-area atheists I interviewed did not speak of their atheist identities as being considered ‘un-Canadian’ or as excluding them from their conception(s) of Canadian society. Atheism, rather, often came across as being another ‘idea’ in a mosaic of cultural ideas. It may be considered unpopular in some social circles, but being an atheist does not seem to foster a sense of exclusion from Canadian society at large in the way that it has been reported in the American context. In fact, quite the opposite seems to be the case. Interviewees tended to view themselves as Canadians who happen to also be atheists, equal in that sense to Canadians who ‘happen’ to belong to any minority group in a country that prides itself on being multicultural, diverse, and tolerant. The key point here is that the atheists I interviewed in Ottawa felt included as equal members of Canadian society.

That atheists in Canada feel like equal members of society, that they are not overly concerned about the status of atheism, and that they often mentioned a desire not to cause offense, speaks to the notion that Canadians genuinely are polite. Indeed, there have been some interesting recent studies that show that the caricature of ‘Canadian politeness’ has its basis in fact, that Canadians, generally speaking, are a rather friendly and upbeat people. McMaster University recently announced the results of a study conducted by two linguistic PhD Candidates, Daniel Schmidtke and Bryor Sneffjella, which compared millions of Canadian and American tweets to deduce what the most common words were from both countries.⁴⁶⁹ Canadians tended to use upbeat, positive words such as “‘great’, ‘amazing’, ‘beautiful’, and

⁴⁶⁹ Matt Terry, “Canadians more upbeat than US neighbours, at least on Twitter, McMaster Daily News,” <http://dailynews.mcmaster.ca/article/canadians-more-upbeat-than-us-neighbours-at-least-on-twitter/>, *The Daily News*, maintained by the Office of Public Relations at McMaster University, January 6, 2016, accessed March 19, 2016.

‘favorite’.”⁴⁷⁰ Americans tended to use negative words such as “‘hate’, ‘hell’, ‘tired’, ‘hurt’ and ‘annoying’.”⁴⁷¹ Shira Packer and Dana Lynch have co-authored a study that compares Canadian-born and Internationally-born postsecondary students’ perceptions of people in Canada (both sample groups were attending, or recently graduated from, postsecondary schools in Canada). The authors found that both the Canadian-born and Internationally-born samples perceived “people in Canada” as “friendly”, with the Internationally-born sample using the “unprompted adjective” slightly more than the Canadian-born sample.”⁴⁷² Although this sample is quantitatively limited, this study, along with the one by Schmidtke and Sneffjella, point to the notion of Canadian ‘niceness’ and ‘politeness’ having a basis in reality beyond self-perception. In terms of the results of this thesis, it would seem that the overall politeness of Canadians plays a large role in fostering the perception that being an atheist in Canada is “not an issue,” as one interviewee phrased it (Hanna, 9.1.2).

Atheists can choose where, when, and with whom they wish to be open about their atheism. They can be, and often are, selective with whom they decide to express their atheism. This, arguably, is also the case with the majority of those who belong to Canada’s majority religion, Christianity. While the notion of choosing to keep quiet about one’s religious or irreligious beliefs seems intuitively negative (secretive, perhaps misleading), this model of social interaction, primarily the avoidance of discussing controversial issues, seems, conversely, to produce at least some positive results. It is difficult, for example, to receive a negative reaction for being an atheist if your associates are not aware that you are an atheist; likewise for Christians. On the other hand, feeling unable to openly discuss one’s beliefs is certainly a

⁴⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁴⁷¹ Ibid.

⁴⁷² Shira Packer and Dana Lynch, 2013, “Perceptions of People in Canada: Canadian-Born vs. Internationally-Born Postsecondary Students’ Perspectives,” *TESL Canada Journal*, 31(1), 59-85, 75. Canadian-born students were “more likely to indicate, when unprompted, that people in Canada are ‘polite,’ ‘kind/kindly,’ and ‘caring.’”

drawback, yielding to the finding of why many of the atheists I interviewed joined the Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa. Whether this model of societal interaction, which I define as “the rare, attuned selectiveness with which religion is discussed amongst strangers, acquaintances, and co-workers so as to avoid causing offense or being offended,” is positive or negative, uniquely Canadian, or common to diverse populations, is an open-ended question, one which would make for a worthwhile future research project. More narrowly, it would be interesting to know whether this social etiquette is regulated to conversations between those who are not visible minorities, and, if so, if regional familial backgrounds or the wearing of religious symbols play equal or disproportionate factors in how often one is asked, “what is your religion?” in Canada. The next, and final, section of this chapter addresses some other potential avenues of research that derive from a consideration of the findings in this thesis.

10.3 Future Research Avenues

I have identified a few future avenues for research based on my findings and other literature that examines atheist identities. The first is to conduct participant-observation and life-history interviews with other Canadian atheist communities for comparative purposes. Once more research on atheist groups is conducted and published one could produce a typology of atheist communities focused on differences, i.e., “is this or that club primarily social or activist?”; “is the club publically engaged?;” “what are their main agendas and issues, and how did these issues take precedent over others?;” “is this club long-lasting or was it short-lived?;” “what are the differences between university clubs, rural clubs, urban clubs, and national clubs in similar cities?;” and “what, if any, are the main regional differences between clubs?” Utilizing similar questions to those I used for my interviews with members of the ACUO would result in

some useful perspectives for comparison, whether the findings show similarities or stark differences. Including a NGAA sample in that research would also aid in determining what is unique about each club, and what may be unique about each geographical location.

Another option is to focus solely on NGAA samples, in exclusion of atheist communities. A regional comparison from other urban settings would be a useful starting point for such a project. Comparisons (i.e. rural or urban; age) would provide significant insight into how atheism is understood by atheists of different demographics in Canada. The questions I asked them for this thesis would be useful for such a project, but I would also consider adding a few new questions pertaining to the navigation of religion during common social interactions, such as maintaining friendships with religious people, deciding whether or not to make one's irreligious orientation public on social media, and how one's atheism does or does not affect relationships at work (and if so, deducing if the type of employment plays a factor).

The second chapter was written to both contextualize this thesis and provide scholars with a history of atheism in Canada. It thus covers main incidents but it is far from complete. It would be worthwhile to expand upon this history with novel approaches and sources. It was limited for practical purposes, in terms of both time and readability, but more research on media such as old newspapers (with a focus on letters to the editor, commentaries, and editorials), obscure court cases such as the case of Ernest and Cornelia Bergsma (see section 2.1.4), and parliamentary proceedings, would contribute to a fuller narrative. The history of atheism pre-Confederation, while difficult to unearth in terms of necessitating the conception of creative areas to investigate, would also be worthwhile as it would contribute to a greater understanding of the development and regulation of atheism in Canada.

One thing that has always interested me is pop culture, especially music. While I was writing my Master's thesis I attended a Nine Inch Nails concert and was intrigued by the attendees' enthusiasm while an image of a cross, aided by a strobe-light effect, switched into an image of a gun, and vice versa. I wondered how many of the people standing around me were atheists, Christians, apathetic, etc., what they thought of the imagery, or if it even went unnoticed or ignored by some. I think an analysis of pop culture influences that are not specifically atheist but are religio-critical and may contribute to both the self-acceptance and social acceptance of atheism would be a worthwhile academic pursuit. In 1994, to use the same example, the alternative/industrial rock band Nine Inch Nails released their second album, *The Downward Spiral*, to critical acclaim and commercial success. This Grammy Award-nominated and multi-platinum selling album contains lyrics critical of religion, such as "I speak religion's message clear/ and I control you/ I am denial guilt and fear/ and I control you/ I am the prayers of the naïve/ and I control you/ I am the lie that you believe/ and I control you," (from the song, "Mr. Self-Destruct") and, "he sewed his eyes shut because he is afraid to see/ he tries to tell me what I put inside of me/ he's got the answers to ease my curiosity/ he dreamed up a god and called it Christianity/ your god is dead and no one cares/ if there is a hell I will see you there," (from the song, "Heresy"). My interest here would not be to unpack the meanings behind lyrics such as these, but to question how widely-absorbed lyrics (and images such as an elderly Jesus-figure wearing a Santa Claus hat in the video for Nirvana's "Heart-Shaped Box"), may or may not be an important influence on one's religious or spiritual development. This is not to argue that listening to certain bands or watching certain videos will 'make' one religious or irreligious, but it is to suggest that openness to such messages possibly contributes to a sense of normalizing religious criticism and, by extension, atheism. Art imitates life just as life imitates art, and since

‘pop culture’ is just short form for today’s most widely consumed art I think that it would be worthwhile to investigate the (potential) link between pop culture and the growing categories of people who consider themselves non-religious.

Other future avenues of research include studying the effect New Atheism had and may have on atheist organizations, (with the hypothesis that it initially sparked lots of welcomed interest, but has subsequently proven to be divisive within atheist circles), and producing a comparative analysis on the roles, treatment, and questions posed to atheists during numerous inter-faith conferences.

None of the above projects necessitate me as author, but there are two articles and one possible research project based on my research that interest me and deserves my attention. It would be worthwhile to write an article on the ambiguity many interviewees felt with New Atheism – many interviewees from both the ACUO and the NGAA asked me in all seriousness to explain what New Atheism was, and many more were quite critical of the New Atheist authors, primarily for their aggressive tone(s) rather than their arguments. Another article that could be derived from my interviews pertains to my question, “Why do you think some people react negatively to atheism?” The majority of responses were quite reflective, did not judge religious adherents in a flippant way, and often pertained to the notion that some people react negatively to atheism because they think of atheism as an attack on them personally, rather than an attack on their ideas, in this case religious ideas.

The possible research project I mentioned in the previous paragraph would be to follow-up with those atheists whom I have already interviewed for a second interview at another stage of their lives. I have kept in touch with about ten of the now former members of the ACUO, and to my knowledge, none of them (of whom I have kept in touch) presently belong to an atheist

community that meet in person. I have been emailed by one member asking if I can conduct another interview with him because he feels his opinions have matured in the year since his interview. Three other members expressed a similar sentiment in person. It would be interesting to compare the answers they provided during our initial interviews with those they would provide if I were to conduct another interview with them today, or a few years from now.

As for the initial question which drove this thesis, (“How do atheists construct their identities in the context of a religiously diverse Canada?”), I would have to conclude, based on the opinions of the forty Ottawa-area atheists I interviewed, that they construct it in positive terms, and usually through comparison, such as reflecting on how atheism may not be well understood in Canada, but it is not attacked like it is in the United States. While most did not state it as such, they overwhelmingly felt tolerated, even accepted, in Canada, and while there were some complaints of unequal treatment or stigma, that actually puts them in equal company with most, if not all, religious demarcations in Canada. Identifying as an atheist in a religiously diverse Canada, it would seem, is to identify with one identity trait in a sea of identity traits, and as I look at the stack of *Humanist Perspectives* magazines on the bookshelf by my desk, a Canadian publication with charitable status, it would seem that at least some governmental bureaucrats would agree.

APPENDIX I

RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION: “IF YOU WERE TO MEET SOMEONE WHO DIDN’T KNOW WHAT AN ATHEIST WAS, HOW WOULD YOU DEFINE AN ATHEIST?”

Atheist Community of the University of Ottawa (ACUO)

Name	If you were to meet someone who didn’t know what an atheist was, how would you define an atheist?
Glen	I think the simplest and best most inclusive definition of atheism is two words. It’s ‘ <u>no</u> <u>God</u> ’, and so, basically, um, the best... the definition I tend to use with people, which I said is, as I said, is the ‘most inclusive’, is basically if your answer to “do I believe in God or a gods, sorry – a god or gods – is anything but ‘yes’ then you’re an atheist.” It’s lack of theism, a response to theism in the negative.
James	I’d just say... very simple, they just don’t believe in God or an omnipotent sort of deity, that’s... it’s really simple, there’s not much to it, I don’t think.
Evelyn*	<p>Do you describe yourself as an atheist? Um, Not really. I feel that is a very strong word that tends to throw people off. I am just more of a person, ah, so, you know.</p> <p>So you don’t like the label? No, ‘cause, like, what is it really? Like, it’s...</p> <p>That was my next question. (Laughter) What is it really? No, seriously, it’s – why do I have to label my nonbelief of something? Yeah. So, if I just don’t believe in it, I just don’t believe in it, right? So, you know.</p>
Dan	I would ask them what they know about the worship of Shiva and Ganesh to which they will very probably reply they know nothing about it. To which I would reply that’s exactly the way I believe compared to all religions. That’s it! There is nothing more to being an atheist than that.
Sylvia	A person who lacks belief in any deity. That’s just about it.
Wade	Ah, atheism is that, going the one step beyond, “oh there could be a God but I’m really not sure,” to saying, “you know, there’s probably not a God, in fact I’m pretty certain I haven’t seen any evidence to see, or that says, that there is one, so, nah, not until someone shows me something that’s like, actually proof.” In my proof I mean to my standards which do conform more along science, scientific method ways of defining proof as opposed to, “because I said so.” So there’s, yeah, defining ‘atheist’ has like a couple different parts, one being, “yeah there’s probably no God,” and the other one is, “I need to see some proof if I’m going to change my mind, ‘cause the proof of a lack of God has been solid enough for me so far.”
Donovan	Alright; to somebody who is not familiar with atheism I would describe it as a nonbelief – something that I do not believe in. It’s not an assertion or anything; it’s just something I choose not to believe in, mainly God or any spirits or magic and stuff like that. Anything in the realm of supernatural – I make a non-claim of that.
Andrew	Primarily that you don’t believe in a God or accept any typical religious claims I guess. You don’t accept the afterlife usually is what people go to first, and then it depends on what they get from that.
Matthew	Well I would, I would explain to them... I guess I would say I’m an agnostic atheist, which means to me that I don’t believe there are any deities, ah, and that’s because there’s never been an argument made, or evidence compelling enough, to suggest that that’s the case, and all the evidence that has been put forward has been unsatisfactory, um, when I consider other arguments to counter them. That’s why; I don’t claim that there is no deity. Yeah, that’s basically what I’d say. So, you would... a definition of atheism would be...do you have one, or... I think... Would you put it in the same bracket as... Usually I’d say that an atheist is anyone who doesn’t believe in God or gods. It’s simply... yeah I guess that’s the simplest way I’d put it, but there are nuances that people have after that.

Belinda	I would define it as disbelief in all the various gods or in all the various religious texts basically, although since that really isn't a phenomenon some people use the word generally to describe someone who simply is highly critical of, or, um... or politically opposed, to religion in society.
Heather	For me it is just not believing in God, and for me I find it is kind of an active non-belief, um; I have known some atheists who just sort of, they say, "well, God is not part of my life so it is not really important." For me I say that being an atheist is sort of important to my identity. So it is not a religion but it's, it's an identity for sure.
Billy	Someone who doesn't believe in God. Simply put. That's it.
Krista	I would say that it is simply lacking, I mean – it's what people would, what I think people would, generally describe it as that, and also call themselves atheists, I mean my friends, which is that it is just a lack of belief in God, you know – whereas I find that, at least occasionally some people will say that I deny God's existence as a necessity. I don't do that, I just say I don't do that. I don't have evidence so I am not willing to make any conclusions about supernatural beings; that's what it means to me.
Tonya	I would say someone who does not believe in God, and not necessarily someone who believes that there is no god. I would say, or I agree with people who say, an atheist is someone who does not believe in God rather than someone who believes there is no god.
Colin	I like to say that it's believing in one less God than you. That's what I like to say, but basically I would say that atheism does just not believe in God. Not believing there is a higher power or any of that stuff, the Bible, none of it. Just not believing in that and yeah, cool.
Brendon	I would tell them I simply don't believe in God or Gods, any of them. Especially Christianity, but especially Islam!
Alison	Umm. An atheist to me is a person who does not have any religious beliefs, and who, um, yeah, who just does not practice religion, nor do they have any belief in a religious system or a religious entity.
Gerard	How I would describe that?! To someone who doesn't know what an atheist is I would say that to me being an atheist is the absence of faith in some sort of deity. I guess that would be the best way to describe it. I would probably try and keep it pretty neutral. I wouldn't want it to be described as something super ideological or something like that. It is not really the way I see it in my personal life, yeah I guess that is what I would say, absence of faith in a deity.
Mike	Someone who doesn't believe in God and then, to be a bit more specific, also doesn't believe in the supernatural, um, I bet some atheists who do have inkling towards the supernatural, but by definition it is not a belief in God, but it's usually associated with all, all things magic.
Edward	Well, I don't think an atheist necessarily has a set definitions; I would say it has several tenets, for example, the biggest tenet of course would be you don't believe in God or some sort of supernatural power, instead you believe that human beings shape their own destiny rather than God determining the destiny for other people, so to make a distinction, in Missouri there are farmers who are waiting for God to provide them with rain so their crops will grow, but an atheist believes that there is no God and therefore scientific laws and weather systems will determine when rain will arrive. Yeah. But beyond that an atheist also believes in the division between church and state, or church or mosque and state or synagogue and state, and the reason why they believe that is because they believe that the state's law is not to enforce morality and enforce morality on others, but instead the state's role is to protect everybody's rights regardless of whether they are religious or not religious, or whether they're Christian or Muslim or Protestant. In fact, I once posted on the Facebook page of a Pakistani friend of mine, I said, "A state should never be held together by religion." Just look at what happened to England in the 16th and 17th century, they tried to hold their state by imposing Protestantism and then by imposing Catholicism and then Protestantism again, and then you had persecution of Catholics under Edward the 6th, you had burning of Protestants under Bloody Mary or Mary Tudor, you had religious repression under, ah, Queen Elizabeth, you had an English civil war under Charles the 1st, you had other social upheavals after that too, like the glorious revolution of 1688. And not surprisingly, after Pakistan decided they were going to found their nation solely on the bases of Islam they have been facing similar problems, true. Problems that are similar but also different from the English case. Yeah. So it's also a strong belief in secularism. I think a third tenet would be that the source of morality is human reason, because even though human reason isn't perfect, as long as humans continue to reason they'll eventually arrive at an answer that is kinder, more humane, and more practical for everybody. So that's how I see atheism.

* I did not ask Evelyn the specific question for this table.

Ottawa-area non-group-affiliated atheists (NGAA)

Name	If you were to meet someone who didn't know what an atheist was, how would you define an atheist?
Juliana	Atheists don't believe in God. There is no Deity. We are not religious.
Tracy	Someone who doesn't believe in God or doesn't prescribe to any religion. I would probably leave it at that if I just met them on the street, because then you have to get into, like, what is religion, and that's annoying, so.
Elissa*	<p>Do you describe yourself as an atheist?</p> <p>I would but I am not actually sure about the definition because everybody has a different definition, and for my definition it is people who don't believe in God. By 'God' means people, a group of people believe in one thing and that's what they believe. I don't believe any of those.</p>
Derrick	Somebody who does not believe in the supernatural. Probably a simple definition!
April	Someone who does not believe in God, and I have taken the time to learn a little bit about religion. Probably not in as much detail as I could if I wanted to be really fair about things, but I used to attend a, like a weekly religious church meeting for like 2 years and it didn't sit well with me. I have a lot of problems with things that happened in the past, like when I studied the Crusades that made me really question Christianity. Like technically I am Catholic. I was baptized and my mom was Catholic but I gave up all religion forever when I was 17, and that was when I firmly became an atheist, and now when anyone asked me after that it was always, I am an atheist. Because I used to technically refer to myself as like an Easter and Christmas Christian.
Hanna	In a very simple, like, if I just met somebody and they said they were shocked. Initially it is always kind of a bit affronting, right? People get perturbed by it so I say, basically, like, lack of belief in any deity, like any sort of Supreme Being, and any idea like that. So, basically saying it's a reaction against a Christian concept, of some sort of God, I would be basically be saying what I do is not, not part of a Christian system. It is kind of where I start the conversation.
Ken	I would describe an atheist as someone who doesn't believe in God or a higher power, sort of like a single entity or a creator. Or any god's really.
Ian	<p>I would start with 'doesn't believe in God.' Not because I am hugely enamoured of that as the sole definition, because that seems to be the short ended sentence, if they are going to start shouting I won't feel like I have been interrupted.</p> <p>That's a good point. Okay so how would you define it to someone that wasn't shouting at you? Like, do you have more of a definition or do you just keep it simple?</p> <p>At that point I would probably go for a more scientific perspective that overlaps heavily with self-identified skeptics a lot of the time. I prefer to believe in things that there is actual evidence for. Unfortunately deities are not one of those things, or several of those things I suppose.</p>
Ashley	Well, someone who doesn't believe in God. When I say agnostic atheist I point out that because you can never be 100% certain about anything on the basis that they are just pointing that out by saying [indecipherable] and that I choose to live my life as if there is no God because evidence points that there isn't. But I suppose there is a tiny percentage [indecipherable – possibly 'of chance'] that there is one. Yeah, that's my basic definition of atheist.
Warren	I would probably describe an atheist as someone who believes that the... or someone who doesn't believe in the existence of a higher power.
Cody	<p>Yeah, well everyone just, everyone has their own definition. There is probably one in the dictionary.</p> <p>Which dictionary are we talking about?</p> <p>Yeah, right! It's probably a different kind of dictionary. I think, usually what I go with, I usually compare it to agnostics. For me that's the best way for me to sort of define what atheism is. For me the definition that I've sort of come to understand is, atheism is complete rejection of God. Complete rejection on the 'idea' of a God. Whereas agnosticism sort of leaves room for a belief in something. That's usually how I would describe it. I guess so. Technically... I don't know how deep you want to get, but...</p> <p>As deep as you want.</p> <p>We were talking about labels and stuff, I do have friends who think basically the same way I do, but they will more often use the agnostic term and I guess technically I could be considered agnostic just because as a fan of science, you know, I can't say there is definitely no God. I can't say 100% that there isn't. Scientifically I think it's irresponsible to just completely reject it. Having said that I also think the complete opposite. I think that for all intents and purposes I am atheist, just because I don't think that the idea that there is a God, that we should even consider that as a possibility. So, you know, maybe to use the analogies of, you know, what caused the big bang. You know, we understand so much and yet so little and one of the things we really don't know is when you go back to those first microseconds, the beginning of the big bang, we don't really know yet what happened, so, you know, you could be sitting around a table, people trying to figure out what caused the big bang, and you are going to have the string theorists, well according to the math... the math actually predicts</p>

	that, you know, matter is made up of these tiny little vibrating streams... then you are going to have, you know, other physicists, like, I think Lawrence Krauss is one of them. I am not going to put words in his mouth, but I don't think he is a fan of string theory, and to be honest I am not a physicist so I can't speak to, like, the other theories, but you can have guys around a table talking about their different ideas, physicists, based on math, based on research, based on evidence that has been collected over the years, right? They are all going to have different ideas but then you are going to have the one guy sitting around the table who says, "oh well, God did it. He is an invisible man in the sky who he is responsible for the big bang so case closed." For me I don't think there is any room for that guy sitting around the table. So in that sense I am atheist. I don't think that God is a proposition that we should have to consider in the first place. Technically I can't say there isn't, but I shouldn't even have to address it.
Jean	That doesn't believe in God, or any, you know, what's that word, 'hocus pocus'.
Kevin	Okay, well, I would say an atheist is someone who does not believe in God. So while they could be... they will admit that observation is the best estimate of what is true and what is not. So, they believe in observable reality, but they don't believe there is any evidence for a god or gods and they don't do anything that is based on a theocentric system. [...Now,] if you don't always define yourself as an atheist, or the way you put it, "unless someone asks," let's say specifically, how would you normally describe your... Well, I would probably call myself an agnostic because that implies that I am not, that I don't have a faith that there's no God, I just don't believe that there is a God, and there is no evidence for it, but that is not something that I am committed to, right? So, just by all observable evidence I am not committed to the final idea that there is no God. I don't believe there is a God, but I recognize that that's not something that I at the moment would be able to know for sure, right, 100%. So, the atheist bus campaigns say something like this. "There is probably no God now relax and enjoy your life." It's probably me. I think that having blind faith one way or another is equally dangerous. So that is why I wouldn't necessarily describe myself as an atheist unless someone, you know, asked me that.
Natalie	I think I would just say that an atheist is someone who doesn't believe in some kind of higher being.
Darryl	I think you probably need to start with your definitions at that point. I mean a lot of people, atheist is pretty well known. It's silly that we have to have a word for it at all really. 'I don't belong to your club so I need a word.' Atheist, agnostic-atheist, and secular humanist, they all mean the same thing.
Hayden	That's interesting, I never really thought about that question. To me atheism is non-religion. No God! It's a question we have to answer, the question why we are here and where we are going after we die. An atheist would prefer a philosophical answer to those questions, instead of relying on a Quran or Bible, Buddhism explanation for it. In that way I think, just in my opinion, I think atheism is a more activism stand or extension of humanism than anything else. How do you define humanism or differentiate between them? Humanism to me is based on, I think, a liberal education actually; it's based on the study of philosophy, but not exclusively, but also the study of science and a better understanding of human beings actions based on rationality and discussion instead of on mass superstition and belief in things that have no factual evidence. In a way I think Humanism is the study of humans based on our understanding of ourselves and our world and our relationship to society in the world. But, it has to be fact-based, evidence-based and researched, not on superstition, or soothsayers, if you will.
Patrick	It's someone who doesn't believe in God. Doesn't believe that God exists! Okay. I mean, that's a starting point, and after that there's some... [indecipherable – possibly 'depends on how the'] conversation goes, but that's basically it.
George*	Do you describe yourself as an atheist? No, not anymore! I used to. Well, I guess I do sometimes, but when somebody asks me what I believe I don't say atheist anymore, because that doesn't make any sense. I say humanist. You know, now that I looked up what a humanist is and went, "hey that sounds like how I look at the world." So, I try to identify myself more of a humanist than an atheist. My follow-up is how would you define 'atheist', but in this case let's go for 'humanist'. How would you define, or maybe differentiate... I forgot what the exact definition was, but generally it's a... How would you explain it to someone on the street when they say, "okay, what's a humanist?" Just someone who wants all the best for everybody. You know, all mankind, everything that promotes the wellbeing of other humans, that's how we should act. That pretty well sums it up.
Nick	It's funny, I have been thinking a lot about this and, I mean, the strict definition, 'I am an atheist,' is "I do not believe in a God," but I think a lot of people in this area, like North America, believe you, themselves, are atheists because they don't believe in a 'Christian' God. Me personally, I would say to someone who asked what an atheist was is, an atheist does not believe in a Supreme Power per se. God, or some overarching mystical being!

Brian	Well it's, yeah, so how would I define atheism? So I would just define atheism as basically a... reason to conclusion that... that a supernatural being doesn't exist and therefore our lives shouldn't be dictated by what people say that supernatural being says it should be dictated by. You know, and I wouldn't get into a big long discussion, but if they wanted to challenge me on it then you know there are all kinds of patent answers, you know. Atheism and atheist is just someone who believes that one of the thousands of Gods that has existed through time, one more doesn't exist.
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* I did not ask Elissa or George the specific question for this table.

APPENDIX II

POINTS WHICH WERE READ DURING MY FORMAL INTRODUCTION TO THE ATHEIST COMMUNITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

- The purpose of the study is to further the sociological understanding of atheism in Canada, with an emphasis on atheist communities and their membership in Ottawa. In lay terms Steven's PhD thesis is an attempt to counter media and popular misconceptions about what atheism is by producing an accurate account of the purpose, goals, memberships, and practices of Ottawa-area atheist groups, including this one.
- Steven will be conducting participant observation, which means he will be participating as a member in the group, and will make observations from that participation which will aid in the development of his thesis. A year from now he will ask for volunteers who would like to be interviewed to tell of their experiences with the group as well as their particular history with atheism, but for the time being, and as far as participant observation is concerned, you will be asked to do nothing besides participate in the group as usual.
- Anonymity will be protected for each and every member through the use of a pseudonym and the removal of identifiable characteristics in any data collected and subsequent publications.
- Should you not wish to share any specific information that came up during a private or public conversation, simply tell Steven at any time and he will not use any data related to or originating from you during that specific conversation.
- Should you not wish to take part in this study at all, simply tell Steven at any time and he will not use any data collected specifically from your participation.
- If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please ask Steven and he will be happy to provide further explanation and details about the goals and purpose of the study.

APPENDIX III

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS ASKED TO MEMBERS OF THE ATHEIST COMMUNITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

1. How long have you lived in Ottawa?
2. What is your age and occupation, or if you are in school, what is your area of study?
3. Do you describe yourself as an atheist?
 - a) If you were to meet someone who didn't know what an atheist was, how would you define an atheist?
4. Do you identify with so-called New Atheism?
 - a) Do you think there are any pros or negatives to New Atheism?
5. Are your friends and family atheists?
 - a) What is your religious background?
 - b) Do you remember the moment you first described yourself as an atheist?
6. Why did you decide to join an atheist community?
7. Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?
8. Do you feel like the atheist community you belong to generally agrees on opinions of social issues or concerns?
9. Is there a change in how atheists of younger generations approach or frame atheism compared to atheists of older generations?
10. Has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views at all?
11. Do you think atheists and atheism are well understood by the public or the media in Canada?
12. Have you ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned you were an atheist?
 - a) How frequent is getting a negative response?
13. What do you tell people when they ask what your religious beliefs are, or your religion is?
14. Do you ever engage in practices that you would consider religious?

15. Why do you think some people react negatively to atheism?
16. What role do you think religion plays in our world today?
17. Have you ever gone through an existential crisis, or a period where dealing with the reality of death was a main concern of yours; something you really had to deal with?
18. If you have children would you raise them to self-identify as atheists?
 - a) Would you send them to a summer camp? One that teaches them words like 'secularism' and how to argue atheist points with religious people?
19. Are there any influences, such as from pop culture, that you would say influenced you to either be an atheist or how you approach atheism?

Note: Questions 6 and 7 were reformulated for my second batch of interviews, which was with atheists who do not belong to any atheist communities that meet in person. Thus question 6, "Why did you decide to join an atheist community?" became "Do you belong to any atheist communities that meet in person?" and question 7, "Could you describe what the atheist community means to you?" became "Have you ever thought about joining an atheist community that meets in person?" Question 15, "Why do you think some people react negatively to atheism?" was added after about half a dozen interviews as a replacement for "Has religion ever played a role in your life," which was redundant since it was already answered through Question 5. Question 19 was added after a few interviews when I noted that some interviewees were telling me a few of their pop culture influences – such as Death Metal and comedians – following our interview.

APPENDIX IV

CONSENT FORM

Consent Form

Title of the study: Opposing the Supremacy of God: Practicing Atheism in Canada's Capital City⁴⁷³

Researcher:

Steven Tomlins

Faculty of Arts, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa

[phone number]

[email]

Under the Supervision of:

Dr. Lori Beaman

Faculty of Arts, Department of Classics and Religious Studies, University of Ottawa

[phone number]

[email]

Invitation to Participate: I am invited to participate in the abovementioned research study conducted by Steven Tomlins.

Purpose of the Study: The purpose of the study is to further the sociological understanding of atheism in Canada, with an emphasis on atheist communities and their membership in Ottawa.

Participation: My participation will consist of one interview which will last approximately one hour during which I will be asked questions regarding my relationship with atheism and my involvement in an atheist community. The session has been scheduled for _____ at the University of Ottawa. The session will be audio recorded.

Risks: My participation in this study will entail that I volunteer very personal information, and this may result in psychological or emotional discomfort, such as stress, anxiety, and regret from having disclosed personal information. I have received assurance from the researcher that every effort will be made to minimize this risk, including the use a pseudonym and the removal of identifiable characteristics from any publications referencing my participation. Furthermore, I have been made aware that all data collected from my participation will be secured in a safe that only the researcher has access to.

Benefits: The benefits from my participation in this study are the satisfaction of knowing that atheism is being taken seriously by academia, and that I am helping to further the sociological understanding of atheism in Canada.

Confidentiality and anonymity: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential. I understand that the contents will be used only for this study and that my confidentiality will be protected by being locked in a secure safe which only the researcher has

⁴⁷³ The name of this thesis has since been changed. Phone numbers and addresses have been removed.

access to. I also understand that the researchers' supervisor, Dr. Lori Beaman, has access to a copy of all original data which will be securely stored in her office [mailing address].

Anonymity will be protected through the use of a pseudonym and the removal of identifiable characteristics from any publications referencing my participation. Only the researcher and his supervisor, Dr. Lori Beaman, will have access to information linking the pseudonym to my identity.

Conservation of data: The data collected, including written records and flash drives (which includes electronic data in Word documents and audio recordings), will be kept in a secure manner through storage in a locked safe that only the researcher has access to; it will be destroyed following a five year conservation which begins the day after the researcher's thesis is published. A copy of all original data will also be securely stored in the office of the researchers' supervisor, Dr. Lori Beaman, which is located [mailing address]. This copy will also be destroyed following a five year conservation which begins the day after the researcher's thesis is published.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will be destroyed.

Acceptance: I, _____, agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Steven Tomlins of the Faculty of Classics and Religious Studies, Arts Department, University of Ottawa, which research is under the supervision of Professor Lori Beaman.

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or his supervisor.

If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the Protocol Officer for Ethics in Research, University of Ottawa, Tabaret Hall, 550 Cumberland Street, Room 154, Ottawa, ON K1N 6N5
Tel.: (613) 562-5387
Email: ethics@uottawa.ca

There are two copies of the consent form, one of which is mine to keep.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: _____

APPENDIX V

INVITATION FOR ATHEISTS WHO DO NOT BELONG TO ATHEIST COMMUNITIES TO PARTICIPATE IN INTERVIEWS

This is an invitation to participate a PhD research study entitled “Opposing the Supremacy of God: Practicing Atheism in Canada’s Capital City”.⁴⁷⁴ The purpose of this study is to further the sociological understanding of atheism in Canada, with an emphasis on atheist communities. In order to better understand Canadian atheist communities, for comparative purposes this study also takes into consideration atheists who do not belong to any atheist communities that meet in person (i.e. those who may or may not belong to online forums or groups such as Reddit r/atheism but do not physically attend an atheist community). Your participation would involve a face to face interview with me, Steven Tomlins. Each interview will last approximately 1 hour. Participation is entirely voluntary and you may withdraw from the study at any time. Your participation is anonymous, and all identifying characteristics, including your name, will be excluded from the reporting of the results. All interviews will be tape recorded and transcribed verbatim. Only I and my supervisor, Dr. Lori Beaman, will have access to the transcripts. Your name will not appear in the transcripts. The study is being conducted solely in English, so speaking English is a requirement, as is being over 18 years of age.

If you wish to participate in this study please contact me at [...].

Thank you for your consideration,

Steven Tomlins

⁴⁷⁴ The name of this thesis has since been changed.


APPENDIX VI

PRO-CHOICE 'COUNTER' POSTERS CREATED AND POSTED BY MEMBERS OF THE ATHEIST COMMUNITY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

**Whose rights
are more
important?**



My Body ~ My Choice **ACUO**

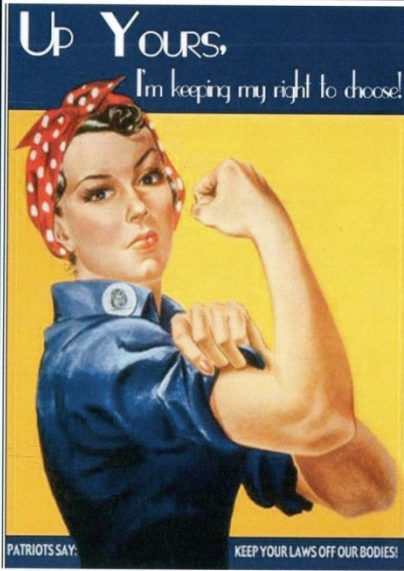


“Should female feticide in Canada be ignored because it is a small problem localized to minority ethnic groups? No. Small numbers cannot be ignored when the issue is about discrimination against women in its most extreme form. This evil devalues women.”

**THIS IS A SEXISM ISSUE
NOT AN ABORTION ISSUE**

Source: Rajendra Kale (2012). 'It's a girl! - Could be a death sentence.' *Canadian Medical Association Journal*. 184 (1): 1-2

My Body ~ My Choice **ACUO**



MAKING ABORTION ILLEGAL DOES NOT LOWER ABORTION RATES

Nearly half of all abortions worldwide are unsafe

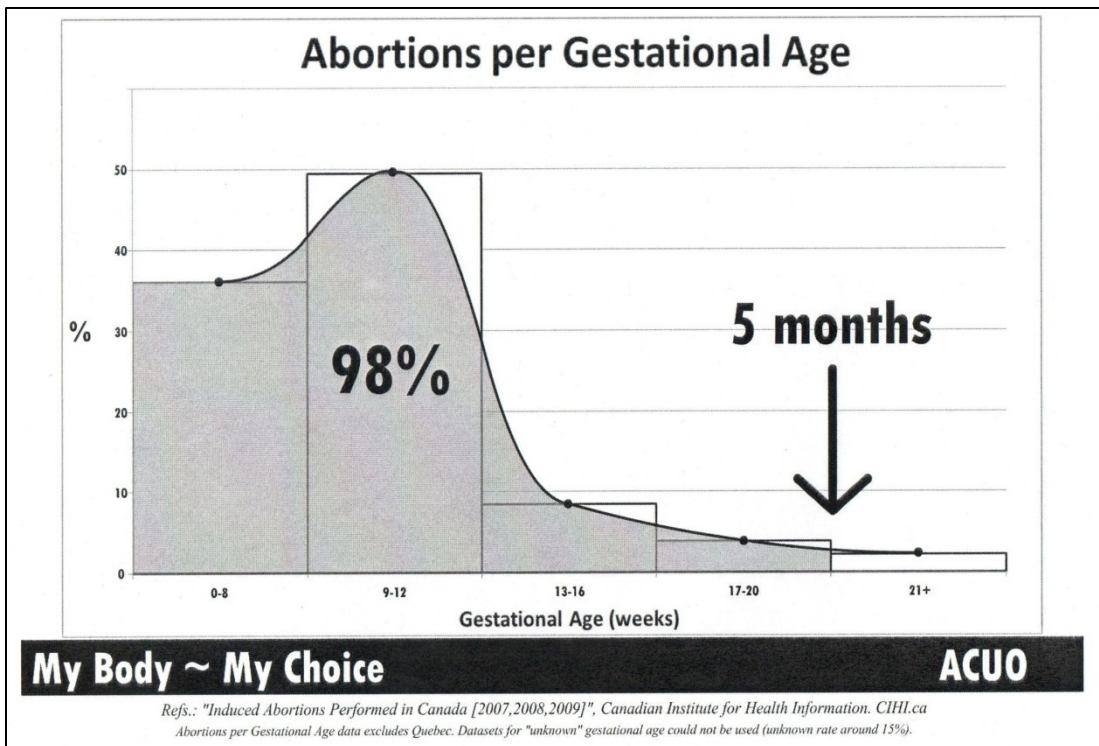
47,000 women die annually from unsafe abortions

8.5 million women suffer serious complications from unsafe abortions, 3 million do not receive the care they need

Deaths from unsafe abortions fell by 91% in South Africa after abortion was legalized

My Body ~ My Choice
ACUO

Source: Guttmacher Institute http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/fb_IAW.html



APPENDIX VII**TABLES FEATURING SELECT QUOTATIONS FROM INTERVIEWEES**

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Table 1: Political, moral, social policy views (ACUO)

Name	Has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views? (ACUO)
Glen	[I]t makes those issues which have been directly worsened by religion more important to me I believe. Um, in terms of political shift, um, I don't think it has particularly made me more left or right wing in terms of issues not really directly related to atheism. I have always been fairly liberal.
James	Um, I feel like even as a Christian I was sort of more left wing, but um, as I transitioned into an atheist I became even more left wing, sort of like further left then centre than I was before.
Evelyn	I think it is the other way around where my beliefs – my social, political beliefs – changed my religious beliefs.
Dan	I pretty much developed all of those on my own. They just happened to fit very well into atheism [...] so, no, not really! Not at all.
Sylvia	Um, well since straight up, my political and social policy views I don't know, [Laughter] I have no idea. In terms of moral views, well because I've considered myself to be an atheist or a nonbeliever at least since I was quite young, um, I didn't really think about abortion or... whatever else is controversial to very religious people before then. Um, yeah, I wouldn't say so.
Wade	Yeah, now I feel comfortable in calling out more bullshit where I see it...
Donovan	I think it has a little bit, but I can't really think of it... think of how right now... um... I, ah... yeah, I guess I think since I've really identified as an atheist I've had more investment in social issues in general actually.
Andrew	Nope, not on anything.
Brendon	[M]orally, I base my morals on preventing suffering, right? [...] So, it's all tied together I guess, in that way, ah, everything... my political feelings are definitely coloured by my distaste for organized religion, and people who claim to have authority in the political arena because of their deity, right, 'theocrats' basically.
Matthew	I don't think um, it has, you know, it [has] affected my political views but um, the emphasis on leading advocates of atheism, like Dawkins, Harris and their emphasis on reason in general has affected my political views, so for sure.
Belinda	I am not sure. I don't remember specifically what I believed before becoming atheist. I think I was always similar minded in terms of moral social issues, just because I never prescribed to religion I never sort of believed [...] this is the way things should be [...] My becoming an atheist wasn't really a big shift for me.
Heather	Yeah, okay, so if we are for like gay marriage, abortions, all that (...) values [I] already had, I don't know where that came from to be honest 'cause my parents are so like not involved in this that I can't like, came up with them on my own, I guess or on the internet maybe. I just turned on the internet but, um, yah, um as for like being left wing and all that I guess atheism is sort a part of that but...
Billy	I know it's kind of difficult to answer that maybe in the way that some other people might if they had sort of, you know, reconverted to atheism, but I would say that, ah, the same kind of skeptical thinking that causes me to be an atheist causes me to re-evaluate my political and other ideas, um, with relative frequency, like with some regularity, so that over time I do see them changing based on the way that they used to be, um, you know, different..
Krista	Um, I, yes, it probably has, um, I guess it has changed my social views... definitely because, I mean, as a Christian I would walk around and see everything: see society and see people as children of God [...] I would see them as all... somebody that I have to love because Jesus loves them, [now] I have different reasons for liking people, like, now I would say, I would like, have compassion on people just because, like, that's the thing to do, you know, it's not because I have been told to by the Bible [...] Um, political, probably not too much. I have never had that strong, ah, political views anyway, but, um, I guess it definitely would change, not that I would ever consider myself conservative before, um, just makes me even less conservative now, I guess...
Tonya	I think that it has made me stronger in some of these views because I don't see the counter argument any more.
Colin	Yes. I guess it is more being interested in atheism and skepticism and being interested in Sam Harris that changed my moral perspective. I was never like a[n] "amoral" person. [...] It just made me think harder about moral decisions and stuff like that and political and social decisions. Just want to have, I want my ideas to be accurate with reality so, yeah, definitely changed and I guess New Atheism is to blame if you will.
Alison	Ahh, yeah because maybe it hasn't changed but it has asked me to take a stand or to form a very educated opinion about something.
Gerard	Even when I was Christian I was still, I was kind of a socialist thinking sort of guy, and I think that that was definitely the same. [...] Being a socialist my morality has always kind of been like, no, people are people and we should really take care of each other.
Mike	Yes, um it helps define it more... my objectives have stayed the same, ah, how I go about them or what I know about my objectives and further goals towards that, that's kind of changed [indecipherable] it's been more so gaining knowledge not changing opinions.
Edward	No. Not at all.

Table 2: Political, moral, social policy views (NGAA)

Name	Has identifying with atheism changed your political, moral, or social policy views? (NGAA)
Juliana	Well I would imagine so because I don't have a scripture telling me, um, dictating certain morals for me, so, by and large in a lot of ways I guess I am social liberal, like I am generally a libertarian – if you're not hurting anyone, you know, probably it's not a really bad idea in terms of policy.
Tracy	[P]olitically, not really; morally, not really, you can still be a moral person without being religious. [...] Socially, I really hate Republicans. They really annoy me. My personal social life has not changed. I think it is probably because I have stayed at a university studying.
Elissa	I guess I am usually open-minded to everything so I don't really see the difference, but I would imagine if you are religious and became an atheist that would be a big change to everything pretty much, like gay marriage....
Derrick	I don't think so because, like, it's not that I start with atheism and go other places, [it's] just like... the way I think about the world leads me to atheism I guess. [...] I guess to the extent that I believe in evidence-based decision making I'm an atheist, and so because I believe in evidence-based decision making as new evidence comes to light on social issues or economic issues I am open to changing my mind.
April	I didn't stop volunteering, or, you know; I even still volunteered with [a religious group that did charitable things] [...] So I don't really think that being an atheist changed morality for me. Not really anything for politics either.
Hanna	No. I mean, being educated on what atheism is and the effects, I think the biggest change in my political view would only come from my reflection on Christianity and the impact that it has had on our entire system, right?
Ken	No, I would still have the same social view I have now. Like rights and that. [...] Political? I have never really changed my political views so that would have stayed the same too, yeah. It never changed a lot – really – so I've always had the same views; I just never spoke of the atheism part.
Ian	I didn't really form those views until after I became an atheist so I hesitate to say that it changed them, but it was definitely part of the process that helped form them.
Ashley	Yes and no! I mean on certain issues, for example, abortion, absolutely. I was very prolife when I was Catholic and in High School. Although interestingly enough, as a debater I can actually admit that there were always things that, 'I really hope they don't say this' [...] the fact that I was even able to point out that there was an argument that they can make that would invalidate my argument was really interesting.
Warren	I think so! I think that as an atheist I am significantly more tolerant of religions other than the religion I was raised in. If, you know, religion is really more of a personal philosophy, I am fine with people adopting whatever faith they like.
Cody	[T]he passion that I feel about using the proper scientific method and being reasonable and really thinking things through and not just taking everything on face value and being skeptical and asking questions and being inquisitive all of that has started to kind of take me into the political arena and rethink the kind of way that I approach politics.
Jean	Oh, I would say no. I am a strong believer in the fact that you don't have to be religious to be morally, you know, strong and ethical and a good person so you know I have always been more left and I still am.
Kevin	No, because I was in a really liberal church when I was not an atheist. Making the switch over was very gentle. So, my church is already very inclusive. It already wasn't aggressive in its approach toward science. [...] I've bounced all over the political spectrum in my life but I wouldn't attribute that to any way curling with my religion.
Natalie	No, not at all; I have always been very left wing, that hasn't really done anything. No. I think this is sort of maybe representative of a lot of atheists in Canada, but you know religion just doesn't play a factor whether they are religious or not. It is more of a social, you know, your social, financial, standing.
Darryl	I wouldn't necessarily say they have changed them because I have been that way my whole life. I think that I would flip that around and say "with religion are your political, social, and moral values impacted?"
Hayden	No, I think my politics has always been liberal but I would believe in finding balance in society. That would probably reflect on my Confucius belief in the harmonies in the [undecipherable], you know?
Patrick	It helped me to clarify, cement, and bring consistency to my worldview. To my politics really. The worldview did that. I was a fairly liberal before, not more liberal, but it did make me more comfortable with some of my ideas. It gave me the tools – mostly like the books, readings, and the blogs, and podcasts.
George	That is really hard to say because I was, you know, I have been an atheist for so long. [...] I think my reason for becoming an atheist is certainly tied to the fact that I was raised to believe in equality period.
Nick	No!
Brian	Political, moral or social... well, all of them obviously. The fact that I'm an atheist is a relatively simple answer to a simple question [...] it doesn't directly connect to political, social or moral issues. [...] So, that is why I say I prefer to describe myself as a humanist, because at least it gives some meaningful framework or at least they will say well, "what does that mean," and we will have a discussion about that.

Table 3: Belonging to an atheist community that meets in person (ACUO)

Name	Quote Regarding Joining and/or Belonging to the ACUO
Glen	...I guess I just kind of, I looked on the [online University of Ottawa] clubs thing and then [...I contacted Brendon and] I joined the Facebook page and that's how I found the group, and yeah, I guess it was just really nice to find a community of people who kind of thought like me in certain ways and, yeah.
James	I joined the club here because, mostly because [Glen] told me there was an atheist club and I said, "oh I didn't know that," and I came to the meetings and realized that everyone's the same as me. I've never really had people to joke around with [...] here is like the first time I've had sort of community to talk about this openly...
Evelyn	I like talking to like-minded people, with people that are open [...] I just think, I just think it's, it's just a group of people that have in common... it's the same thing as any other group. It's just people with common interests, and that don't want to be judged for something that they take to be real and they can just sort of share it with each other...
Dan	Because there was, ah, religious groups, left, right and center, but I never saw any atheist groups on campus anywhere. I just didn't know it was there. Then I saw it [the ACUO table during Reason Week] and I'm like, "hey sure, why not."
Sylvia	[T]he community here is more so of a resource to meet, like I said, like-minded people, so most of us are all skeptics. It's good, you have some, you know – if I ever needed some sort of extreme support I know that I can go to the atheist community and not have God shoved down my throat.
Wade	I never found that this atheist club talks about atheism, we just talk about cool shit that is not religion, and sometimes Reason Week, which is really cool because I would've found the debating club anyways just to argue with people, it just so happens that I feel I'm doing some good, like, I'm just throwing it out there: but not even the woman's centre stood up to defend pro-choice, that was the atheist club!
Donovan	I think it's just a place that you can go and talk to like-minded people and not have to worry about saying something which would really upset somebody else, and they'd go on this whole shebang, [...] but when you can go and hang out with a bunch of buddies and you know that they all think the same way as you it's sort of like – it's a comforting feeling.
Andrew	[A]round my [...religious friends] I had to just make sure I didn't say anything on either chance that I would offend them or start a debate at a time when that would have made either myself or everyone else uncomfortable [...] so I wanted to meet people who I could talk about this stuff without knowing that it is going to turn into a debate.
Brendon	It's a bunch of, ah, it's a bunch of friends getting together, and they can have, you know, they can have discourse; they can have the kinds of conversations that they probably wish they could have with everyone, [...] because a lot of the time if you want to talk about, you know science, or philosophy or religion it's a conversation stopper, right?
Matthew	[W]hile there isn't anything new or variant about disbelief in God there seem to be new kinds of ways – or forever new kinds of problems – resulting from our religion, or new ways of understanding them. With meeting with like-minded people I discovered those kinds of problems.
Belinda	I didn't necessarily have a particular interest in doing sort of advocacy or, you know, awareness or anything; I just wanted the social aspect, to meet like-minded people I guess.
Heather	[I]f you're an atheist you usually have a kind of logic and, like, intelligence that I like in people so it's sort of easy to get along with people if they're sort of like-minded, so that's what I was sort of looking for – some [like-minded] friends...
Billy	Ah. I think it was sort of like a combination maybe of social isolation and wanting, you know, I wanted to make more friends and also that I kind of wanted to, ah, just talk to... I really like to have conversations.
Krista	I am glad that it's there so that it's represented in case there are people who like, don't believe in God but don't know that there is a group like that, um, not that I think it is as big of an issue in Canada anyways, [as] it would be, say, south, the US, where there is the bible belt...
Tonya	It was a struggle for me, like it was a <i>real</i> battle for me to figure out where I was. You know what I mean? So I hoped that I would find similar people and things like that.
Colin	I was like wanting to meet like-minded people so I was like, "we should start a club" and because I know they have clubs at university and you know, a great way to meet people. Especially, girls!
Alison	Umm, well [my boyfriend] joined it and he was, ah, he got [quite involved in it] and then I was like, "oh, this sounds, like, really fun." He was like, "yeah, it is really great."
Gerard	[My friend] is like the founding member and I think that the reason that I decided, well, to join, is they were doing, well; I thought it was a good point but I think, like I said, it was something that just seemed to be missing from the landscape of clubs at the U of Ottawa, right?
Mike	[I wish it was] more political, um, actually push back against religion [...] but the group is much more about getting together, drinking, and talk about being an atheist so... fine. [Laughter]
Edward	I sort of like the idea where there's this club where you can say all of these things, where you can say whatever you want about religion or not believing in God and you don't offend anybody, so that's sort of a good thing. [...] I think there's some sort of tendency to be averse to controversy in Canadian society, [...a]nd so the advantage of the atheist club is that you get to have these meaningful [discussions...] and you don't have to worry about upsetting anybody...

Table 4: Not belonging to an atheist community that meets in person (NGAA)

Name	Quote Regarding Not Belonging to an Atheist Community That Meets in Person
Juliana	It never occurred to me.
Tracy	No, I find other atheists that meet in groups, it's a lot of political stuff, and I think you can separate religion from politics. [...] From what I have heard, because I have never been to one – I have no desire to go and talk to them – but from what I hear, they are apparently very men's rights [...] I don't know if that's true...
Elissa	I want to join and, like, learn how to think differently I guess. Like, normally I was just, like, 'let them go,' but I want to learn how to criticize and talk to people to change their mind if they are religious. Because they really shouldn't spend or waste their time doing that. I think it is silly. [...] I think it is just a waste of time in their life.
Derrick	No, [...] because it's just a question of, for me, whether you believe in God or not, whether you subscribe to a supernatural view of the world, and then once you have established that, like, I am not really interested in doing missionary work or something.
April	Actually, it hadn't occurred to me that there were atheist groups that met up, to be honest. I am not really sure what people would get together to talk about. Like, we don't believe in God... is that kind of it?
Hanna	[I]t doesn't really appeal to me because I think by saying, "I'm atheist," I want to kind of get out of the whole political thing with religion, and it's so... like, 'meeting fellow atheists,' like, what does that mean? It doesn't mean anything.
Ken	Pretty much no, I don't think I would [join an atheist community].
Ian	My membership [to CFI] lapsed in March and I haven't felt any particular need to try to renew it [...]The national level management of the organization seems to be people who aren't in tune with what the actual members of the organization want the organization to do. So, they are not great about things like sexual harassment at conferences [...] the local branches are fantastic about that but they get essentially no [national] support on those grounds...
Ashley	I used to be a part of CFI Canada. [...] I quit this summer. [...]They are stuck in their ways and unfortunately it says a lot that the majority of the [National] board is basically middle-aged white men. Some non-white men, but...
Warren	I have thought about it. [I'm familiar with one such group] and I'm in favour of what they do, but it seems like a pretty big time commitment as well, and right now I have got one focus, and that's my business [running a firm].
Cody	I don't [belong to any atheist communities]. I can really say that I don't. Like I said, I went once with a friend to meet with the Centre for Inquiry thinking it would be, you know, academic minds getting together, and it wasn't quite what we thought it was going to be. [...] I would say, yes, I'd thought about [joining such a group], but I just don't feel like I want to belong to a 'specific' group. Again, it is the whole label thing, you know, if I join a group am I just, you know, an ideologue just like everyone on the religious right is? I don't really feel like I want to go there.
Jean	I don't see the attraction in terms of... unless you wanted a really changed world and be a part of some sort of active, you know, group. Just hanging out with other atheists seems kind of unnecessary. I don't know.
Kevin	No, I have never thought about it. I mean I think it's an interesting idea. I would wonder what they would do there because, to be honest, it sounds like a very interesting time... but also if one is only there for that express purpose it's kind of a waste of time.
Natalie	No! I don't know if I need to discuss my atheism with anyone... present company excepted. You know, in the sort of public forum, mostly because I am just... I am very secure with what I believe or what I don't believe and, I don't know... there are so many more things that peak my interest than atheism. It is just a part of who I am, and not something that I actively pursue.
Darryl	Not really, no. I mean, any group that isn't religiously affiliated is technically an atheist group, but no, I mean; I don't belong to any, you know, anti-theist or pro-atheist lobby groups or any of that sort of support networks. [...] I think just talking to people and speaking my mind online and around is enough. Just keeping that sort of open dialogue...
Hayden	No, I go to some meetings, [...] but I don't go to them very often, mainly because I don't have time. [...] For me on my spare time I prefer to read up on these issues and be informed and I prefer discussion like this more than in a group. When a group of like-minded [people] sit down to talk there is not a whole lot of discussion, mainly because you are on the same side, but for a discussion with people who you have fundamental differences makes it more interesting, just having debates.
Patrick	If I were to join, like, if I were to move to another part of the country I would probably join an atheist group to build a new community for myself. [But today] I have a lot of friends [and] I have a lot of hobbies that take up a lot of time...
George	Not really! Only, like, when someone mentions it, like, 'hey that would be kind of interesting.' [...] I have 4 kids right now, I don't have time. No time for secret clubs.
Nick	If there was one in Ottawa I would be interested in checking it out as long as it is not the New Atheists. Because they just drive me crazy.
Brian	first of all, I don't have time in my life to do all the things I want to do. [...] I didn't feel that I needed to have; I needed to go to, you know... some kind of 'Sunday atheist service' and drink coffee afterwards.

Table 5: The public and the media in Canada (ACUO)

Name	Do you think that atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada? (ACUO)
Glen	Hmm Canada, okay. Well I haven't really heard it discussed too much in Canada because I think Canada is you know, it's less of a; it is already less of a religious nation than say the United States, where a lot of the craziness goes on. [...] There is less activism going on. It is less, you know relevant. [...] It's less relevant to Canadian media I suppose.
James	You know I used to think that, but I've; "no." [...] I always thought that, um, because it's a simple thing to understand, the only... you just don't believe in a god, I thought, you know, that wouldn't be very hard to get, like, but if you watch a lot of news anchors and interviewers they just don't – can't – fathom the idea of not believing in God...
Evelyn	Kind of! I think they got the gist of it but I think they still like have this lens on where atheism is still like very disruptive to the order of things in a normal functioning society [...] I do believe it is better in Canada than other places in the world because you know, the free speech thing, and how you can just not do something if you choose to.
Dan	In Canada I have no idea. I honestly have no idea. I know that the West, well, central Canada is more religious than the rest generally. How much I don't know. How much atheism is well represented, well understood, I don't know. I haven't gone out and talked to random people about stuff. So, yeah, I really don't know. I don't have a clue.
Sylvia	It's not that bad. [...] as a whole, I mean, you never really see, you know, 'evil atheists rally outside of Parliament, talk about why they should be able to go around raping and murdering everyone.' [said sarcastically or semi-sarcastically]
Wade	Depends on the media outlet. [...] CBC doesn't get it; CBC is like a Canadian Bill O'Reilly channel [...] Well that's CBC TV, radio's different because they're, who's on radio now? All those lefty liberal pinkos and half of them are atheists to begin with so yeah they've got to pander to a lot of "let's accept everybody blah, blah, blah, blah, blah," but because they're so offended by not being politically correct we can legitimately go up to them and say, "well, what about us, you're not being equal if you don't get all sides of the story."
Donovan	No. [...] Yes and no, but it's sort of, like, hard to tell because I don't know the public that... I don't know everybody.
Andrew	In Canada the public in general seems to have a good basic understanding of just what it means to be an atheist. You don't get as many people saying, "oh what's that?" The media doesn't seem to. I have very rarely seen it come up. [...] The public] at least know that there are people who don't believe in God and they tend to be okay with that.
Brendon	No, no, no. I don't at all. Especially in the media – especially in American media [...] it appears to me there's less religious fanaticism in Canada than in the States, where our politics are less influenced by the Christian Right; we have gay marriage, and ah, it doesn't fly down south yet. But there's definitely a stigma associated with atheism.
Matthew	I don't think it is, but um, I suspect religion wouldn't in itself be either, [...] people define atheists [...] as people who have this active, um, political or social stance against the role of religion in society, and on the other hand many people would say, identify as Catholic, but not even pay attention to Catholic positions on abortion or homosexuality...
Belinda	Hard to say – probably not; I have had friends who are really just semi-religious and find out I am an atheist and just ask "what is that? What is going on with that?" which surprised me because it is pretty straight forward.
Heather	Canada? To be honest I would not, like, felt discrimination so it is sort of hard for me to answer because I, um, I mean – I have never lost anything because I am an atheist. I have never... so I don't feel there is a lot of religious discrimination but, or well, I mean discrimination against atheists, but I am not sure that other people would.
Billy	Ah, when I read um articles and stuff written by people who are not self-proclaimed atheists I do get hints of, um, sort of, misunderstanding of maybe what atheists... or maybe [what] they would generalize with.
Krista	I think, hmm, it depends on whether you are talking to religious communities or not, um, 'cause I would say that my view of atheism, when I was a Christian, was quite distorted...
Tonya	No. I don't think atheism is well understood anywhere really. Maybe! Except for like Sweden and Norway where it is like eighty-five percent atheist. For the most part I don't think it is. I don't think it is at all. I think that there is this idea that, that we are out to destroy religion.
Colin	In Canada? I am just going to go with my gut and say no. [...] Yeah, I am going to say no because I have seen a couple like interviews with Dawkins on Canadian Television and the broadcasters – the journalists – just didn't get it, like, bad questions. They didn't understand his answers kind of thing, and so I have seen that.
Alison	I think yes. [...] I don't think atheists are really, are really being viewed that badly. [...] I think atheists are generally seen as rational educated people now. So it is hard to be a, umm, 'ignorant criminal bad atheist' I think.
Gerard	I don't think it is at all really. I think there is even though it is becoming more normal it's still kind of misunderstood [...] I can't really remember the last time that it was an issue in the media, atheism. I think maybe it's like part of Canadian politeness. We just don't talk about it.
Mike	No, um, there's a lot of straight up misconceptions because most people don't know [indecipherable] when I told my dad I was an atheist he thought that meant that I was worshiping the devil.
Edward	Well because sometimes there's religious people in your circle, and if you say that God doesn't exist and if you go into why atheism is more logical than, um, Islam or Christianity, then chances are, ah, the people, the religious people, take it personally, because [...] they fail to make a distinction [...] between your beliefs and your own person.

Table 6: The public and the media in Canada (NGAA)

Name	Do you think that atheism is well understood by the public or media in Canada? (NGAA)
Juliana	Not necessarily by the public, I mean, there is still a lot of people that are kind of like, “atheism, what is that?” or like, “is that a religion?” or um, or, you know, they would say they don’t believe in God, but they don’t necessarily... they might not recognize that as atheism, so I think there are a lot of people who don’t necessarily get what atheism is.
Tracy	No! I think there are so many different types of atheists that for the media it’s about a sensational story, and so they are going to focus on the most extreme [...atheists] and those are the ones that get attention. So, in turn a lot of people don’t voice their atheism because the general public, what they know about atheism is what they hear in the news.
Elissa	In Canada? I will say no because Canada is such a multicultural country they... unlike in the States [where] they have free speech, in Canada, we don’t. I will say “no” because you can’t really criticize in public or on TV or computers.
Derrick	I guess yes to the extent that like if atheism just means people who don’t believe in God or religion then most people understand that and because it’s not necessarily and extremely complex, and like a large system it is hard for the media to misrepresent it the way that it can misrepresent something like Libertarians and Communism...
April	I think a lot of the people that I meet identify as atheists and have never really given any sort of religion a chance whatsoever. So sometimes they are just kind of making the decision because that seems to be the popular thing to do and it seems like the young university educated middle class person in Canada tends to be an atheist...
Hanna	No, no, I don’t. I think that we, well, we just don’t talk about it. [...] I don’t think we are very critical of religion in Canada. We pretend we are and we talk about religions critically but we don’t look at our own.
Ken	No! Well, not by the religious, more religious groups I suppose. I believe they would think more we’ve sort of given up on God, and that means we have given up on goodness and living life as good, more like we are living a life of sin.
Ian	‘Recognized,’ sort of, ‘understood,’ no not at all. It is much worse in the US than in Canada but I think a lot of Canadians who are in a position to make decisions that affect the lives of atheists have a fairly poor grasp of what atheism means to people who subscribe to that ideal.
Ashley	No! Better than in the US but no! I think that too many of us grow up with this idea of atheists as being wonder-less and [...] too many people get all their information about atheism from religion, so I think we are dealing very much with struggling against this sort of concept.
Warren	I think that depends. ‘In Canada’...there is a really wide spectrum there, right? [...] I think that because Canada isn’t necessarily a homogenous place overall religious acceptance is higher and that includes the decision not to have one.
Cody	I really don’t know, I mean, I want to say my default answer is “no” just because I think it is hard for the media to really cover any issue properly. There is always some bias [...] I think the reason I have such a hard time with it [this question] is because I don’t necessarily see atheism being covered a lot [...] You see it more in the States.
Jean	Well, without going into detail I would probably say no. I mean, I don’t see it in the news very much, I don’t see it discussed, but frankly religion itself is not discussed very much, I mean other than the scandals. [...] Not because atheism as a whole is being, you know, purposely avoided as a topic, it’s just all religions avoid it in a culture like ours where you try to have everyone comfortable and happy.
Kevin	No, I don’t think, so, but at the same time I think that different groups would have vastly different understandings and reactions to it. [...] I think most Canadians would not necessarily go back in time and take out “God” from the Constitution, [... b]ut, I don’t think most Canadians would be sympathetic to someone aggressively pushing this issue.
Natalie	To an extent; I think people are generally aware of the basic ideas of atheism, um, but I don’t think it is as defined, not as it needs to be, but we just tend to not define it because it’s almost just a part of life now, you know, atheists exist, we are out there, you know, everyone knows one so there is not that same self-definition that’s needed.
Darryl	In Canada, I am not sure because the topic isn’t really... isn’t discussed that much here. I mean, most of the media reports and most of the stuff that you hear and see is coming out of the US. [...] In Canada, I don’t know, I haven’t really seen a good news article about atheism coming out of Canada. I certainly haven’t seen us attacked on CBC.
Hayden	I don’t think so. I think I might be an example of that, I mean, I say myself I am atheist but I don’t have a clear definition of it. I don’t think – I could be wrong of course – I don’t think the public understands well.
Patrick	I don’t know, by the media? Rex Murphy clearly doesn’t. [...] Other people, other media, I don’t know. I don’t watch much media [...] I mean I read CBC and that’s pretty much it and they don’t normally talk about religion that much so it’s hard to say what their opinions are. [...] The public I don’t know!
George	Not at all! [...The] public and media really don’t understand. I watch a lot of CNN, unfortunately I should watch more Canadian but their news is just so much more polarized and exciting.
Nick	No I don’t! It would be like saying “is Christianity understood?” There are so many different shades of Christianity, I mean the Dawkins type, the New Atheists are fairly well understood because they are the most rabid, but there are so many different shades of atheism. I mean just as much as there are shades of different people.
Brian	I think the public and media is reacting really to the spokespersons for the atheist community which is kind of dominated by the celebrity atheists. CFI has done a good job I think of being in Canada anyway and I don’t see – even though it is very big in the US – I don’t see them getting much in the way of a popular press there.

Table 7: Negative responses to atheism (ACUO)

Name	F	I	?	Quote Regarding Negative Responses to Atheism (ACUO)
Glen		X		I don't know, some people would say, "okay, cool;" most people I would say are like that, so fairly infrequently I would say that you really kind of get a negative reaction. Normally at worst it would be just a kind of confused or questioning reaction.
James		X		Um, I think it's sort of few and far between. [...O]ther than [Reason Week] I haven't really received any negative sort of reactions.
Evelyn		X		Not very often; not very often.
Dan			X	I haven't told a lot of people because it has never really come up, you know, Canadian politeness and all.
Sylvia		X		Not so much, I mean... I don't; pretty much everyone who knows me knows that I'm an atheist and if they have a huge problem with it it's not someone I'm a friend with anyway, so it's really not a big deal.
Wade	X			Oh yeah, all the time, all the time. Like, I generally don't hang around fundamentalists anymore unless I'm like really prepared to get offended and prejudiced and stuff but, like, in that case sometimes it's fun, although I do feel prejudice and stuff [...] I was a fat kid, I sweated a lot so I smelt bad, I wear [rather distinct clothing] and I'm heterosexual – so I get ripped for all sorts of things.
Donovan		X		[Besides one specific incident] the most negative reaction I would get would probably be like "oh, why are you an atheist?" you know, like it's not even a big thing, they're just kind of questioning it and they're just like, they're curious or they don't even know what it means or something like that.
Andrew		X		Very rare, it depends on the context [...] if you are putting yourself in a position where you are saying, "okay, come debate with me," then like, with the [club event/information] tables, then yeah, it's more frequent to get a negative response.
Brendon	X			I'm trying to think of a specific example. [...] if you tell someone who's religious that you are an atheist you can see the emotions like even in their face, right? Right when you tell them, and I get that a lot, yeah.
Matthew		X		Well, I really don't talk about it in person much. If I had to make a speculative guess I would imagine that one in ten people would be bothered by that. If I announced it publicly, well, one in ten would actually express a negative reaction to it. [...] if expressing it to friend – people I know – then I imagine a negative reaction would be closer to one in a hundred.
Belinda		X		I need to think about it if I ever got a negative response. I think it is more usually a surprise. People just are really surprised that I am an atheist.
Heather		X		Not very frequent.
Billy		X		So infrequently, possibly due to the way that I try to be tactful, so that might be why. [...] in general I would say very infrequently, like I don't remember the last time.
Krista		X		Okay, I would say not very frequent, because the people that I tell are just "okay, cool." So, it is infrequent.
Tonya	X			Well, from my family it's fairly consistent. [...] I, somebody will say like, I'll tell them I'm an atheist or we will have a discussion and it comes out that I'm an atheist and they come from a religious perspective and it's negative you know. [...] I would say a negative response is more often than a positive response.
Colin		X		Not, not... I mean, I guess people are pretty accepting in Canada but who knows what they are thinking.
Alison		X		I think some people, well, no, I am trying to think. I don't know really. Not really – the only, the only time that I have gotten a negative reaction is because I, I triggered it. If I get approached by someone who is like, "the word of God, here you go, a little pamphlet," I purposely say "fuck off!" [...] Um, but, generally no, I definitely do not. [...] I have never been stigmatized or had bad reactions for being an atheist.
Gerard		X		You are allowed to in, like, Canadian society, at least be kind of allowed to say, "yeah, well, I am not religious," and people don't really go "OMG!"
Mike		X		It's not a concern except for when we booth... when we booth, um, most of the people that like come to talk to us are there to, to disagree with us, um, but we kind of ask for it. [...] But it's uncommon to have a negative reaction I would think, um.
Edward		X		I think it is infrequent.
	3	16	1	

F=Frequent; I=Infrequent, and ?=Unsure/not clear.

Table 8: Negative responses to atheism (NGAA)

Name	F	I	?	Quote Regarding Negative Responses to Atheism (NGAA)
Juliana		X		Very rarely, very rarely.
Tracy		X		[She simply answered “no” to the initial question “have you ever received a negative reaction from someone?”]
Elissa		X		I haven’t met anybody who gets offended. Maybe old people might.
Derrick		X		I don’t know. Not that frequent I guess because I don’t engage.
April		X		Very infrequently! I really don’t find that people are that stressed here about religion, like Canada. I don’t think, like; if you identify as, you know, Muslim or Catholic or whatever, that people are going to freak out about it. They are just going to accept it and move on, and equally if you are an atheist people aren’t going to think you are some sort of immoral pig who should be burned at the stake.
Hanna	X			I really try not to talk about it, so. Considering my active attempts to avoid the subject it is amazingly often. If I would say to somebody, I would more... if they asked me what I believed in, and I respond “atheist,” more often than not I anticipate a negative reaction from them.
Ken		X		[He simply answered “no” when I asked “Have you ever received a negative reaction from someone when they learned you were an atheist?”]
Ian	X			Frequently! [He noted examples from living in the US; when I asked about reactions in Canada he described them as “Confused reactions!” and later added, “Maybe I tried to find ways to say other than I am an atheist since I find that phrase a little heavy somehow. I have gotten so used to not being free to say that, that is still feels weird to actually say that phrase.”]
Ashley		X		It is not that frequent in part because the people I surround myself with are people who are positive towards it. So I mean I sort of created my circumstances as such that I don’t expect a negative reaction because I am not in a situation where it would make sense. I also think that again in Canada you are less likely to get a negative response.
Warren		X		Not frequently!
Cody		X		I cannot think of an example where I have had a negative response.
Jean		X		There is not that many people that I have actually told. I mean, I don’t really have active conversations about this [...] I mean it comes out in conversations in the sense that you talk about issues and it’s just evident that, you know, I think that is ridiculous or, you know, whatever this or that.; it is never bluntly said “I am an atheist.” It doesn’t occur that way.
Kevin		X		Well, very seldom as you could say.
Natalie		X		No, not really, but it is also not something that I go around telling people. You know, if you ask I am obviously very comfortable with discussing it but generally the people who ask are also atheists, so it tends to be a very positive reaction.
Darryl		X		To me not at all. I have had debates with Christians. I love debating with religious people because I love to hear where they come from and I tend to just ask questions until they get mad at me but people don’t usually get mad at me it’s pretty good.
Hayden		X		I don’t think I ever have any negative response.
Patrick		X		Twice! That is how frequent it happened. It is not even negative it’s just weird. I never had negative responses.
George			X	Oh, certainly, yeah, certainly! Recently! Oh gosh in the last week! It gets to be... I don’t know if I can say it was a full negative reaction. [...] I don’t bring it up a lot because people get too offended and it’s not, you know, that’s not what I want to do.
Nick		X		In all the years since. I guess you would say, I came out, came out publicly. The 80’s were bad, but it was that whole born again Christian rise movement you know just really the whole I found it garbage from the eighties. The 90’s were much better so far you know I tell people I am an atheist and it’s like, “oh that’s nice.” Now there is not so much public or, there is not so much of a negative response.
Brian		X		[I] kind of opt out of trying to evangelize my atheism or even just make it so I don’t provoke negative responses. To the degree that which, that I get into those discussions, it’s usually very one on one or small group and I’m pretty lazy fare about others so I am not trying to threaten them and so they don’t feel like they should, sort of, ‘negatively react’ to me, you know? They’ll live and let live.
	2	17	1	

F=Frequent; I=Infrequent, and ?=Unsure/not clear.

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