

“I Think Some People Need Religion”: The Social Construction of Nonreligious Moral Identities

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In this article, we examine moral identity construction among nonreligious people. Based on 30 in-depth interviews with nonreligious Americans unaffiliated with secular movement organizations, we analyze some ways nonreligious people may utilize their experiences with religion in society to define nonreligion as a sign of value, worth, and character. Specifically, we demonstrate how our respondents drew upon their childhood and current experience with religious others to construct nonreligious moral identities by (1) defining religion as concerned with conformity and obedience rather than morality, (2) highlighting prejudicial assumptions religious people promote about nonreligious people, and (3) characterizing interactions with religious people as a mechanism that led them to seek meaning in their lives from other sources. In conclusion, we draw out implications for understanding (1) the social construction of nonreligious moral identities and (2) some ways current religious norms may serve as a pathway to nonreligion.

Key words: atheism/agnosticism/irreligion; identity; morality; socialization; religious change.

An emerging line of research shows nonreligious populations are experiencing considerable growth and becoming more visible in the contemporary United States (see, e.g., Kosmin et al. 2009; Cragun, Hammer, and Smith 2013; Baker and Smith 2015). Implications of these studies include that nonreligious people who identify as atheist draw on the “cultural toolkits” (Swidler 1986) of secular and religious cultures to establish credible individual and collective identities (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Smith 2013a; Guenther 2014). They also suggest that openly nonreligious—and especially atheist identified—people face considerable harassment, marginalization, and discrimination (see, e.g., Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Hammer et al. 2012; Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014). While these studies have invigorated our understanding of religious

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privilege and the ways atheists resist marginalization (Cimino and Smith 2014; LeDrew 2015), we know far less about the ways nonreligious people make sense of religion in their construction of nonreligious selves (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Smith 2013b). How do nonreligious people unaffiliated with secular movements construct nonreligious identities, and what implications might their experience have for expanding sociological understandings of contemporary nonreligion?

Although an emerging line of scholarship explores the ways members of marginalized groups fashion creditable identities in relation to religion, they typically focus on the ways such groups “moralize” (McQueeney 2009)—or define as good, positive, and valuable—religion (Wolkomir 2006). If religion may be moralized or used to signify the worth and value of people who identify as religious, however, it may also be demoralized or used to signify the worth and value of people who identify as nonreligious. In the former case, as noted in previous studies (Sumerau 2012), people emphasize the positive aspects of religion to suggest religion facilitates the establishment of valuable selves. In a reciprocal fashion, the latter case involves people emphasizing negative aspects of religion to suggest the absence of religion facilitates the formation of valuable selves (Guenther 2014). Although sociologists have outlined many ways religion may be moralized in the course of people’s identity formation, there has, to date, been very little research on processes of demoralization (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013). In this article, we attempt to answer the question: How do people demoralize religion in ways that facilitate the moralization of nonreligious identities?

We examine these questions through an interview study of self-identified nonreligious Americans unaffiliated with pro-secular or atheist organizations (for how individuals who are affiliated with such organizations accomplish this, see Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013). Specifically, we analyze how these people, responding to religious privilege embedded within American structural and interactional patterns (Barton 2012), constructed “moral identities” or identities that testify to our value, character, and worth as good people (Katz 1975). In so doing, we synthesize and extend analyses of nonreligious identity formation (see, e.g., Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2011; LeDrew 2013, 2015; Cimino and Smith 2014; Guenther 2014; Lee 2015;) by demonstrating how nonreligious people may use prior and current experiences with religion to “moralize” (McQueeney 2009) or “normalize” (Warner 1999) nonreligious selves. It is not our intention, however, to generalize our findings to the larger nonreligious population. Rather, we use the data from these cases to elaborate strategies of moral identity work people may use to define contemporary religion as a moral justification for becoming nonreligious (see also Schwalbe et al. 2000). We encourage other researchers to extend our findings by gathering data from more robust samples or samples from other countries around the world. Additionally, we believe scholars could focus on specific nonreligious populations—those who come from various religious backgrounds or no religious background—or those whose identities intersect with other minority

identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ as well as nonreligious) to see whether our sensitizing concepts apply with these groups as well.

In this article, we draw on Symbolic Interactionist traditions exploring the social construction and maintenance of moral identities ([Katz 1975]). Rather than seeking to explicitly define morality as one or more characteristics, such studies explore the ways people construct some identities as signs of character, value, worth, and positive social standing (Kleinman 1996). Since morality, like any other socially constructed description of human activity (Goffman 1959), may mean a wide variety of things within varied contexts, times, and populations, such studies focus on strategies whereby people seek to define themselves and others as good or valuable members of a given social world (Sumerau 2012). Instead of seeking to ascertain a specific form of morality, we outline strategies whereby nonreligious people may define themselves in ways that testify to their worth, value, and character. In so doing, we outline “generic processes” (Schwalbe et al. 2000)—or common ways of doing—people may use in a wide variety of settings wherein they seek to moralize nonreligion by demoralizing religion.

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF NONRELIGION

In recent years, sociologists have demonstrated the emergence of expanding nonreligious populations and newly formed nonreligious movements throughout the American sociopolitical landscape (see, e.g., Blankholm 2014; Cimino and Smith 2014; Cragun 2014; Baker and Smith 2015). Rather than a new social formation, however, nonreligious populations, communities, and movements have existed throughout American history (see Warren 1966; Baker and Smith 2015; LeDrew 2015). Further, such groups have long sought to destabilize the influence of religion in America by appealing to rational and scientific conceptions of knowledge while seeking to dispel religious bigotry and superstition (Cimino and Smith 2007, 2014). What has changed in contemporary times, however, is the amount of attention nonreligious individuals and groups receive from scholarly, political, religious, and media outlets, and the opportunities for mobilizing nonreligious collective action via new technologies and expanded recognition of the usefulness of nonreligious forms of knowledge (Zuckerman 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012). In fact, studies suggest understanding the role of religion in society likely requires examining the social construction of nonreligion (see Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014; LeDrew 2015; Lee 2015).

Examining the social construction of nonreligion requires analyzing the ways people construct and signify nonreligious selves. Following LeDrew (2013, 2015), this process may involve many pathways whereby people depart religious selfhood for nonreligious identities. Some of these people may have never experienced “interpersonal” (e.g., familial, religious organization, or peer group based) religious socialization and thus never claimed religious selves, though most did. Likewise, the growing number of Americans raised outside of religion (Merino 2011) may never

have experienced structural (e.g., governmental, educational, or public based) religious socialization, though most Americans have. For those who did experience interpersonal and structural socialization, their life courses can result in shifts back and forth between religious and nonreligious selves (see also [Smith 2013a](#)). Whereas the pathways whereby people construct nonreligious selves may vary in relation to socialization experiences within interlocking systems of racial, class, gender, and sexual inequality, [Smith \(2013b\)](#) notes all such pathways aim to establish moral or positive selfhood without religion (see also [Zuckerman 2011](#); [Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013](#); [Guenther 2014](#)).

Making sense of the social construction of nonreligion, however, also requires awareness of the position of religion in contemporary American society (see, e.g., [Hammer et al. 2012](#); [Hammer, Cragun, and Hwang 2013](#); [Wallace, Wright, and Hyde 2014](#)). Even though there is no empirical reason for linking religion (or any other ideological system) with morality, the assumption that moral people are religious and that religion provides a moral gauge for society pervades interactional ([Barton 2012](#)) and structural ([Heath 2012](#)) assumptions and norms throughout contemporary American society (see also [Heiner 1992](#); [Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006](#)). As a result, religion is granted the privilege of serving as a moral yardstick whereby Americans may interpret the character of others regardless of the actions of the people in question ([Barton 2012](#)). As such, all nonreligious people, like the ones at the heart of this study, may feel the need to find ways to redefine morality if they hope to resist marginalization via religious means ([Smith 2011](#); [Guenther 2014](#)).

Historically, one strategy available to subordinated groups seeking to dispel the moral authority of dominant groups involves emphasizing the negative or oppressive activities of such groups (see, e.g., [Yip 1997](#); [Collins 2005](#); [Schrock and Schwalbe 2009](#)). Since dominant groups are often granted authority regardless of their actual behaviors ([Schwalbe et al. 2000](#)), subordinate groups may simply point out or make known the backstage realities and discriminatory actions that dominant groups rely upon for their social elevation (see also [Goffman 1963](#)). At times, subordinates may accomplish this by engaging in “oppositional identity work”—transforming negative labels applied to subordinates into evidence of creditable selves by subverting dominant notions of morality ([Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996](#)).

Previous research has documented strategies of oppositional identity work in many social contexts. Some of the gay and lesbian Christians in [McQueeney's \(2009:167\)](#) study of lesbian, gay, and straight-but-affirming churches, e.g., “moralized” their sexual identities by defining religious notions of sexual morality as the result of human prejudice and ignorance disconnected from the love of God. As one gay man noted: “That’s what this church is all about. Because society has oppressed us for so long, we finally had enough and started a place of our own where nobody can tell us we’re not God’s children, we are God’s children, y’all, and I venture to say that we might even be God’s chosen ones.” Similarly, researchers have shown how racial minorities ([Anderson 2000](#)), poor and working class

people (Kusenbach 2009), transgender people (Schilt 2011), and cisgender women (Ezzell 2009) subvert dominant depictions of them as inferior by highlighting positive characteristics of their selves and experiences. In each case, subordinates demoralize dominant assumptions and beliefs by redefining these assertions as unwarranted and themselves as socially valuable.

Like McQueeney's (2009) study noted above, researchers have also documented many ways people explicitly engage in oppositional identity work to signify their worth, value, morality, and character as "good" people. Specifically, these studies have shown how subordinates create "moral identities" by emphasizing, e.g., caring and compassion in their volunteer work (Holden 1997), efforts to combat social inequalities in religious traditions (Sumerau 2012), emotional and instrumental services they provide to others (Deeb-Sossa 2007), and "alternative" approaches to helping and caring for others (Kleinman 1996). Whether they stressed the social value of their efforts or the results of their work, people in each of these studies emphasized positive aspects of their lives to signify moral selves.

Studies of the nonreligious, however, have generally limited their focus to the experiences of atheists (but see Zuckerman 2011) and individuals affiliated with pro-secular organizations (Guenther 2014; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Hunsberger 2006; Pasquale 2010). Considering that atheists make up only around 10 percent of the nonreligious population (see Kosmin et al. 2009; alternatively, see Baker and Smith 2015), this leaves the bulk of nonreligious identity formation unexplored at present. Even so, some of these studies (Smith 2011; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Guenther 2014) suggest atheists wrestle with socially constructed versions of moral worth, and seek to disentangle morality from religion in their identity work processes (see also Cragun 2014). Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp (2013), in a study focused on members of an organized atheist group, found that the members of that group used four core strategies to position themselves in opposition to religious people: (1) they constructed religious people as a threat to individual atheists; (2) they constructed religion and religious people as a threat to society; (3) they argued that religious and atheistic worldviews were oppositional; and (4) they characterized religious believers as inferior to atheists. In many ways our study is similar to that of Guenther et al., though our findings differ slightly, as we will note in the discussion below.

Additionally, instead of focusing specifically on atheism, the present study explores the oppositional identity work of nonreligious people unaffiliated with secular movements or organizations who identify in varied ways (e.g., atheist, agnostic, spiritual but nonreligious, no religion, free thought, and humanist) with specific attention to the ways they demoralize religion to signify nonreligious moral identities.

Rather than focusing on distinctions between nonreligious labels (i.e., agnostic versus atheist) or between regional cultures (i.e., northwestern nonreligious people versus southeastern nonreligious people), however, we follow other identity work scholars (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) in outlining the shared strategies such varied groups may engage in to make (moral) sense of nonreligion within

a religious social context (McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012). In so doing, our analysis broadens existing understandings of nonreligious identity formation while revealing the ways previous research into moral and oppositional identity work may provide “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1969) capable of guiding further elaboration of the social construction of religion, nonreligion, and moral value in contemporary American society. While this strategy allows us to tease out generic or shared strategies people from various regions and identifications may utilize in their identity work efforts (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996), it also may only set the stage for nuanced comparisons of variation within and between the many types of nonreligious people and places of nonreligious activity where such endeavors—with varied content as a result of regional, identification, and other sources of variation and distinction—may take place on a broader scale. Our analysis can be seen as another contribution for comparing and contrasting processes of demoralizing religion and moralizing nonreligion in varied settings, contexts, and populations.

DATA AND METHODS

Data for this study derive from 30 semi-structured interviews with self-identified nonreligious people in the United States who were unaffiliated with any pro-secular or atheist organizations. Unlike religious affiliates and affiliates of secular or atheist organizations, finding nonreligious individuals who are unaffiliated with pro-secular or atheist organizations to participate in interviews is challenging because they do not congregate; there is no location where you can go and find them. As a result, finding such individuals required some creative thinking and a rather unorthodox methodological approach for gathering a sample. To begin with, the second author constructed a basic demographic survey. A link to the survey was posted on the craigslist.org¹ websites of several large cities in the United States (two in the Northeastern USA, two in the Southeastern USA, one in the Midwest, and two in the Western USA; the cities were chosen in order to increase regional diversity among participants). The advertisement indicated that the researchers were looking for participants for a sociology research project. They were told, “Participation in the project is based on your answers to a short survey. In other words, you need to take the survey first to see if you will be selected to participate in the full project.” The advertisement then noted that those who were selected to participate based upon their survey responses would be paid for participating (participants were paid \$50 for participating in an interview). The

¹According to a Pew Research Center (Pew Internet & American Life Project 2009) study, Craigslist users are similar to Internet users more generally. At that time, 49 percent of online adults used online classifieds. Younger people (particularly the 25–44 age-group) were more likely to use online classified ads, as were individuals with some college education and individuals living in urban and suburban areas. There were only slight differences between men and women in how often they used online classifieds; men were slightly more likely than were women.

survey asked respondents for their email addresses in order for the researchers to follow up with them to inform them whether or not they qualified to participate in the full study.

This approach generated 432 responses to the survey. However, after cleaning the survey for incomplete responses and missing data, 205 responses remained. Two criteria were used for selection into the second portion of the study. The first was survey respondents had to indicate they had no religious affiliation. Of the 205 complete responses to the survey, 73 responded to the question, "What is your religion, if any?" with the option "None (no religious affiliation, atheist, agnostic, humanist)." The second criteria for inclusion was that survey respondents *not* be affiliated with secular or atheist organizations. This was based on responses to the following question, "Do you affiliate with or belong to any pro-secular or atheist organizations?" Response options were "Yes" or "No." Of the 73 individuals who reported no religious affiliation, 6 reported having an affiliation with a secular or atheist organization and were therefore excluded from the study; 67 individuals met the criteria for inclusion into the study.

Before conducting interviews with the nonreligious individuals located via the survey, the researchers conducted five interviews with personal contacts who met the criteria for inclusion in order to test the interview guide. Those five interviews are included among the 30 interviews described in this study. The remaining 25 individuals who were interviewed were selected among the 67 individuals who met the inclusion criteria with a preference for individuals who would create a diverse sample of participants. Thus, preference was given for the following groups as they were underrepresented in the survey sample: elderly individuals, non-white individuals, and individuals with lower socioeconomic statuses (i.e., no college degree or limited income). The grant that funded this research² included funds to remunerate up to 30 participants. Close to 90 percent of the 67 eligible individuals were contacted before 25 of them agreed to participate. Of the 30 interviews, 4 were conducted in person, 4 were conducted via electronic chat (at the convenience of the participants), and the remaining 22 were conducted over the phone. Other than the electronic chat interviews, which were already typed, the remaining 26 interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Although the second author sought to learn some specific things about non-religious people (e.g., the composition of their social networks, definitions of religion and science, etc.), the interviews took a mostly conversational form (Berg and Lune 2011). Rather than fully unstructured or structured, questions primed respondents with specific topics, which allowed him to gather reactions and then probe for further details. In this manner, he was able to capture impressions, attitudes, and stories about a variety of topics while also gaining more specific

²The grant was a relatively small grant that was internal to the University of the first two authors. The authors work at a private, nonsectarian university. We do not believe there is a conflict of interest based on the source of the grant funding.

information about religious and nonreligious meaning. He was able to target the conversation to reveal in-depth interpretations of prominent issues noted in surveys of nonreligious communities and individuals (Berg and Lune 2011). The interviews lasted between 1 and 2 h.

It is important to note that the nonreligious people interviewed ran the gamut of self-identifications (e.g., atheists, Humanists, agnostics, Brights, etc.). Whereas previous studies of the nonreligious have focused primarily on atheist-identified subjects and subjects active in some form of secular organization (cf. Guenther 2014; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Hunsberger 2006; Pasquale 2010; though see Lee 2015), our sample extends beyond this small proportion of nonreligious people (cf. Cragun 2014; Langston, Hammer, and Cragun 2015). In so doing, as Table 1 reveals, we have gathered a more diverse sample than the typically white, middle, and upper class, heterosexual populations found within atheist and secular movement groups (see Baker and Smith 2015; Cimino and Smith 2014; Smith 2013a) that may allow for more elaboration of generic or common strategies (see Schwalbe et al. 2000) of identity formation common to differently situated nonreligious people (see also LeDrew 2013, 2015). As such, our respondents' construction of nonreligious moral identities may reveal greater variation than previous studies in this area while showing strategies common in nonreligious identity formation beyond atheist-identified experiences (but see Zuckerman 2011).

Our analysis developed in an inductive manner. Drawing on elements of "grounded theory" (Charmaz 2006), the first author examined the content of the interviews in their entirety looking for recurring themes. In so doing, he established a set of codes capturing the ways nonreligious people talked about religious experiences, which he shared with the second author. Recognizing that respondents argued religion was no place to find morality based on these experiences, the first author went back through the data organizing these discussions into thematic categories. As a result, we created labels to capture the ways our respondents suggested religious experience led them to embrace nonreligious selves.

CONSTRUCTING NONRELIGIOUS MORAL IDENTITIES

What follows is an analysis of the ways nonreligious people may use religious experiences to create nonreligious moral identities. First, we examine how nonreligious people discuss their early lives in ways that position them as either experts on religion or people who never needed religion to live good lives. Then, we show how they "demoralize" religion—and by extension moralize nonreligion—by mobilizing perceptions of religious practice, sharing religious assumptions about the nonreligious, and revealing experiences with religious people. While these strategies explicitly define religion as an inadequate source of morality for the respondents, they also implicitly "frame" (Goffman 1974) nonreligion as a moral identity

TABLE 1. Demographics of Interview Participants

	% (n = 30)
Gender	
Male	33.3
Female	66.7
Race/Ethnicity	
White	73.3
Black	13.3
Hispanic/White	13.3
Marital status	
Married	30.0
Single, never married	33.3
Cohabiting	20.0
Divorced	6.7
Other	10.0
Age	
18–30	33.3
31–50	53.3
51–70	13.0
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	80.0
Homosexual	10.0
Unknown	10.0
Educational attainment	
Less than high school	3.3
High school diploma	6.7
Some college	46.7
Bachelor's degree	20.0
Graduate degree	20.0
Unknown	3.3

developed from recognition of these deficiencies (see [Smith 2011](#) for a similar “recognition” process among atheist activists).

Conceptualizing Socialization

Since religious influence is currently embedded throughout American interactional and structural patterns of activity ([Barton 2012](#)), it is not surprising that many nonreligious adults must make sense of the role of religion in their early lives. As [LeDrew \(2013, 2015\)](#) notes, religious and irreligious socialization can facilitate nonreligious selves in adult life (see also [Merino 2011](#); [Lee 2015](#)). The nonreligious people we studied echoed this suggestion while revealing different paths religious and nonreligious socialization could facilitate. Further, they regularly—with and without prompting—explained their religious background prior to

explaining their nonreligious identities. As a result, they used their religious backgrounds to create the backdrop for their current moral identities (McQueeney 2009).

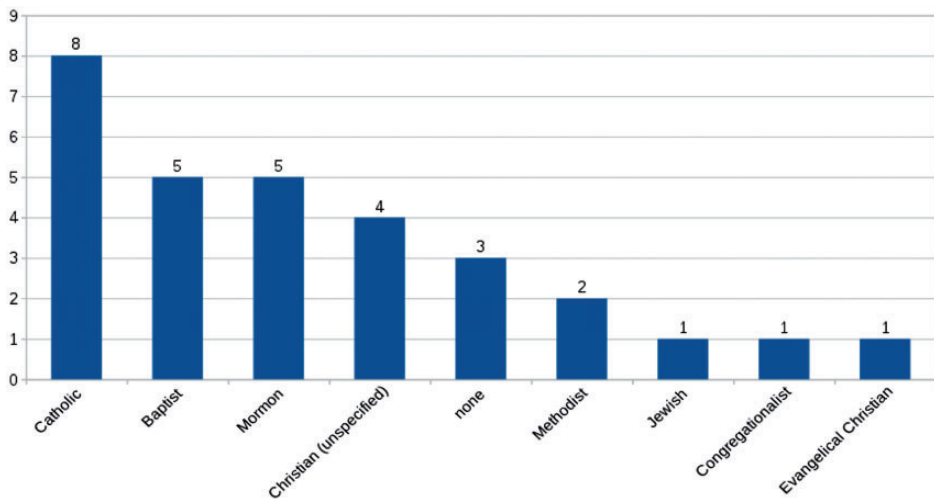
As suggested by LeDrew (2013), our sample was split between people who experienced religious upbringings (27 out of 30 did, though the degree to which religion was emphasized varied among those 27) and those who did not (3 out of 30; see Figure 1). In the former case, our respondents defined themselves as “experts” (i.e., social actors familiar with a structural form, see Goffman 1963; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Guenther 2014) on contemporary American religion by highlighting the prominent roles religion played in their families and experiences. Similar to the ways African-Americans (Collins 2005), sexual minorities (Adams 2011), and transgender people (Sumerau, Schrock, and Reese 2013) often become experts on racial, sexual, and gendered patterns that escape the notice of others, our respondents suggested their religious backgrounds combined with their nonreligious perspectives allowed them to more easily see the problems within religious traditions (see also Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Smith 2013a). While we explore their observations in the next section, we begin by outlining the “credentials” (Goffman 1963) they offered to claim expert perspectives on religion.

Nonreligious people established themselves as capable evaluators of religious morality by highlighting the religious credentials of the people who raised them. They implied high levels of religiosity within their own socialization, which facilitated their abilities to make sense of religion from the inside. As a heterosexual white male named Gelkat³ noted: “My father was the superintendent of Sunday School. I would say I went to church regularly from as early as I can remember. My mother was the head of an organization.” A white heterosexual woman named Alysha added: “I know I was baptized and this was in the first five to maybe eight years of my life. My grandparents were Southern Baptist and pretty religious. In fact, my grandfather played piano in the church.” A white heterosexual man named Dan further noted: “At one point, my Dad was a bishop, which is a leadership position in the religion. So, very devout family.” A white heterosexual woman named Lenore added: “I have an uncle who is a pastor,” and a heterosexual man named Tom recalled, “My parents were Evangelical Christian and my father was a pastor.” In fact, two of our respondents had once been missionaries. Rather than just average religious childhoods, our respondents noted familial credentials they suggested made them familiar with the operation of religion.

At other times, they signified religious credentials by noting the (usually rather high) activity levels of their families. As Dan explained after the quotation shared above:

³All names are pseudonyms. We asked participants to choose their own pseudonyms, which is why some of the pseudonyms employed are rather unique.

FIGURE 1. Former Religions of Interviewees.



Religion was a major part of life. We were very, very, very active, went to services weekly. It was basically mandatory in the family. We held family home evenings, which is kind of a religious thing we're supposed to do every week, and we were strongly encouraged to do all sorts of religious stuff.

Another respondent noted: "We were totally Mormon I would say and we'd pray every dinner. We'd probably do scripture study for school everyday." A black heterosexual woman named Elinor noted: "We read the Bible A LOT, prayed with the church every Sunday, and did Bible Studies." A white heterosexual woman named Margery added: "I grew up Catholic. Dad sent us to Catholic school from first grade on, we completed the sacrament, and went to confession and all that fun stuff." Another white heterosexual woman named Kenya noted: "I was baptized in Catholic Church, went to the whole school, went to communion. Make sure we have on the finest dress for Easter. It was just how my parents were raised." They suggested they were very familiar with religion due to high levels of religious activity in early portions of their lives.

While the bulk of our respondents received fairly significant processes of religious socialization, some of them were raised without religion. In such cases, however, they still sought to signify their ability to evaluate religion. Rather than considering themselves experts, they noted they had easily lived their lives without religion and thus anyone could live good, moral, and positive lives without it. In so doing, their credentials echoed transgender people (Mason-Schrock 1996) and sexual minorities (Adams 2011) who argue they have "always been" outside of social expectations, and know full well that such "norms" and "assumptions" are simply optional (Sumerau, Schrock, and Reese 2013).

While some of the respondents in this group grew up nonreligious, others experienced religion as something one did socially without much meaning. In either

case, they suggested religion was simply unnecessary for moral development. As a white heterosexual woman named Cathy noted: “It was more of a social thing. I remember deciding to have a blessing, but rather than make me feel stronger about it, I felt kind of more off about it.” A Hispanic woman named Anna added: “My parents weren’t very religious as far as going to church. They would go sometimes for the big holidays, but they weren’t big into church. So we didn’t really; it wasn’t a big part of our family when we were growing up.” Another Hispanic heterosexual woman named Sophia noted: “My mom ended up living in a house owned by a church rent free, and that’s the only time I really got into religion.” For these respondents, religion showed up in their early lives, but it was never a big deal. Rather, it was generally just a phase they passed through in the process of their overall development, and, as they noted in later statements, unnecessary.

Another group of respondents simply grew up without religious socialization. In such cases, their parents usually had little taste or concern for religion, and as a result, it was not an important element of their lives. As a black heterosexual woman named Louisa put it: “My mom tried to take me to church every so often, but we were not really religious.” In more extreme cases, respondents recalled parents who had negative opinions of religion. As a white heterosexual woman named Darcy recalled:

Both my parents were raised Catholic and it was forced on them. They absolutely despised it, and they decided we were allowed to choose. They weren’t gonna force any type of religion on us like their parents did. So, it was never anything, and my family has always done that. None of us partake in any type of religion.

In such cases, nonreligious people pointed out that religion—like any other learned behavior, group membership, or hobby (see Cahill 1987)—simply was not a part of their lives, and could not be a necessary component of overall development.

While this section focuses on the backgrounds of nonreligious people, researchers have consistently demonstrated the importance of background assumptions and socialization processes in the development of religious (Sumerau 2014), nonreligious (Smith 2011), and other forms (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996) of identity work. Since our experiences provide the meanings and symbols necessary for crafting socially recognizable selves (Goffman 1959), a lot of who we are and how we do things arises from our experiences with others (Cahill 1987). In the following sections, we demonstrate how our respondents drew upon these religious backgrounds in their articulation of nonreligious moral identities.

DeMoralizing Religion

Scholars have found that people often “moralize” their religious—as well as sexual, racial, gendered, and classed—identities by highlighting the moral value gained from religion (see, e.g., Loseke and Cavendish 2001; McQueeney 2009; Sumerau 2012). As noted above, if religion can be moralized, it stands to reason that it can just as easily be demoralized (i.e., by highlighting the lack of moral value observed in religion). Among our respondents, this was a common tactic in

signifying nonreligious identities. Specifically, they demoralized religion by (1) defining religion as obligatory and conformist, (2) noting prejudicial assumptions religions teach about the nonreligious, and (3) discussing negative experiences with religious people. In so doing, they noted that while some may find moral value in religion, others find the opposite (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Guenther 2014). Through these descriptions, they created space for nonreligious morality by challenging the moral standing of religion.

Defining religion

The nonreligious people we studied demoralized religion by “framing” (Goffman 1974) religion as something they were “forced” to do when they did not know any better. Respondents suggested that while they might receive benefits from religion, participation in a religious group might ultimately create conformity rather than morality. Put simply, learning to agree with others might not necessarily lead to acting in a positive way for others (see also Barton 2012). As Dan noted when discussing his experience as a missionary:

I actually was quite conflicted about it. Even going into it, I felt obligated to do it, and that was the major reason I did it. I baptized a dozen people or something like that, but by the time I left many of the people I had baptized had already left the religion. I did what I was supposed to, I helped kind of bring people into the religion. I didn't hate it, but I didn't love it.

A white heterosexual woman named Allison noted: “I did identify at one point as Christian, but that’s because I was a kid and I was just being told what to think, but I always had too many questions and I just kind of was half-hearted about it. I had no idea what the Bible was actually.” Rather than a moral guidepost, nonreligious respondents defined religion as an obligation they once experienced before letting go of once it was no longer required. While some (like Allison) adopted spiritual but nonreligious identities and others (like Dan) self-identified as atheists, they all suggested religion itself was unnecessary, but it was often forced upon people—especially children—even though, as Gelkat noted: “I don’t think religion really makes much difference.”

Nonreligious respondents also demoralized religion by defining it as conformist. In so doing, they noted the ways some religious teachings encourage the marginalization of “different” people. In some cases, as Allison notes in the following example, such efforts involved limiting what could be said or thought within religious groups:

So essentially, what the Bible is saying is don't eat from the Tree of Knowledge like Eve. Don't inform yourself, ignorance is bliss. You should just not learn things, not explore things, you should be ignorant. It's like population control to me, controlling knowledge, I mean it is one thing to be spiritual but another thing to be religious since religion is just an excuse for people to divide themselves and judge each other.

Another spiritual but nonreligious respondent (Margery) added: “It’s like a God who points the finger at you and said that you did wrong, send you to hell.” Sophia

added: “We discuss the whole homosexuals going to hell and he said I have to agree with him. Like that, it’s just how they dictate what your life is supposed to be and there is a God but its just why are all these dictations with religion. It’s just we love each other like thy neighbor so there should not be all these other rules mixed in with it.” A white lesbian woman named Althea added: “There are so many religions that are so much against homosexuality. I think that makes people have to make a decision they shouldn’t have to make.” Rather than moral (i.e., being good to one another or thy neighbor), nonreligious people defined religion as an exercise in conformity and “rules” they believed were unnecessary and often harmful. As a result, many of them suggested there was as much or more moral value in nonreligion when compared to actual religious teachings at present.

While nonreligious people defined religion as obligatory or conformist rather than inherently moral, they stopped short of arguing against all religion. Instead, they often suggested religion, while not necessary for their morality, might be useful for others. As Althea noted later in her interview: “I think some people need religion as a guide. I think my definition of sin being against social norms is not enough for some people, and its important to have a very big melting pot to have a rich society. I think that’s where some people need to be, religious for one reason or another.” Gelkat added: “And who knows, maybe religion has some truth in it. I kind of respect other people’s religious beliefs and its nice to think that someone is in heaven.” Nonreligious people defined religion in ways that challenged its assumed morality (see Barton 2012), but left room for it to be an important part of the morality of others.

Assumptions about nonreligion

Our nonreligious respondents also demoralized religion by highlighting negative stereotypes or prejudicial interpretations of nonreligion promoted by religions. In so doing, their statements accomplished two goals. First, they were able to subvert these stereotypes in ways that established nonreligion as a positive aspect of selfhood. Second, they were able to demonstrate perceived immorality (i.e., prejudice) arising from religion. Their efforts called religious morality into question while signifying nonreligious moral identities. Further, their experiences revealed subtle ways marginalization of nonreligion is built into the interpretive patterns whereby many people make sense of the world.

Nonreligious people noted that religious people typically assumed they were lacking in family values (Broad 2011). Although studies have shown that family is just as important in nonreligious circles and that nonreligious people generally fashion healthy and positive family arrangements like other groups (Zuckerman 2011; Manning 2013, 2015), religious people our respondents encountered were taught the opposite at some point. As a white heterosexual man named Timothy recalled: “People say, like gosh, I’m really surprised you have such a good family life.” A white heterosexual woman named Turtle added: “They are surprised by us, and say but your kids are so good.” Interestingly, these same stereotypes (i.e., nonreligious as out of line with family values) have been used repeatedly by some

religions to demonize secular and religious sexual minorities despite increasing recognition that sexual minorities often interpret and accomplish familial efforts in similar ways to any other group (Fields 2001; Broad 2011).

In fact, nonreligious respondents noted other stereotypes religious people they encountered seemed to develop about them that were eerily familiar to the ways other minority groups have been demonized (see Collins 2005). As a black lesbian woman named DeeDee explained, some religious people seemed to assume lack of religion automatically plunged one into a life of misery: “They think I’m going to burn down the church or something. Yeah, its like the nonreligious worship the devil, which you can’t believe in the devil unless you believe in God too, which then makes you religious? They think that you are going to do witchcraft, put a spell on them, and one lady said to me that the world would end if there were more people like me.” Gelkat offered a similar observation: “We were taught that if someone leaves religion life is going to be terrible for him. They are going to get into all sorts of problems and drugs and alcohol and their life would be terrible, they’d die a miserable terrible death and go to hell. I mean that’s the message you got growing up.” Respondents also noted religious people they met explicitly telling them “there’s something wrong with you” or “you are doomed to rot in hell,” which again echoed some religious constructions of other minorities (Wolkomir 2006). Nonreligious people were well aware that they were being “othered” (Sumerau and Cragun 2015) by some religious people, which suggested to them religion might be a system of discrimination rather than morality (Barton 2012).

Our respondents were also well aware of negative connotations tied to atheism within many religious circles and contemporary American society (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Hammer et al. 2012). As Tom noted: “There are negative connotations for atheists, but that’s because people don’t know what it is. They think its just like an evil terrorist person. I remember one Christmas at home, my step dad says, ‘Dave likes guys, he’s an atheist,’ and I was like what? That doesn’t even make sense.” A Hispanic heterosexual man named Buzz added: “Religious people think of me as an idiot, and I guess if someone really buys into their religion 100% they don’t necessarily want to hear good things about me.” A white lesbian woman named Hillary added: “Religious people stereotype nonreligious people as sinners and going to hell and this and that, but I have a job, I go to school and when [my partner] goes to church I’m just chillin.” Rather than moral lessons, our respondents noted some religious people learn derogatory assumptions about non-religion, and in cases like that noted by Tom, they learn to associate nonreligion with other groups some religious people have often defined as immoral. Rather than accept these lessons, our respondents—like some lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women who leave religions (Wilcox 2009)—demoralize religion to fashion moral identities from other sources.

Religious experience

The nonreligious people we studied also demoralized religion by highlighting negative experiences with religious people. They noted ways of how religious

people they met failed to demonstrate moral behavior (Barton 2012). In fact, the example other religious people set for our respondents often confirmed their impression of being nonreligious as a more “moral” way of living. Rather than the forces of secularization or the excesses of mainstream society often used to explain the growing nonreligious population (Smith 1998), our respondents suggested it might be some religious people themselves who were facilitating departures from religions.

In many cases, nonreligious people specifically noted the ways some religions’ political leanings led them to feel uncomfortable or disinterested in religion (see also Hout and Fischer 2002). They often highlighted right-wing tendencies among some religious people they encountered that did not align with their own values. Gelkat noted: “I remember their politics became kind of right wing and so there was a lot of association with God in the right wing like they sort of went together. It was difficult because it was like we want you to accept Christ, but we want you to believe what we believe, do this and do that, and I really didn’t want to.” Sofia noted: “Sometimes in class religion gets in there and is just a very hot topic. They talk about what’s good and what’s not, and then, if something is good, who’s it according to? Who considers it good, who said something is bad?” In such cases, non-religious people are, as a couple put it, “turned off” by some religious people’s judgment of others and acceptance of religious notions of inherent good and bad.

In most cases, however, our respondents spoke specifically about interactions with religious people they found uncomfortable. They highlighted the ways their experiences of religious people’s actions suggested judgment or lack of feeling rather than acceptance and caring for others. Turtle noted: “I was thinking how much I judged people like constantly noticing who wasn’t wearing proper garments,⁴ even though I didn’t know them, I was taught to keep track of these little things like oh they’re drinking a beer, always judging people and I think that’s horrible to judge people like that.” A white heterosexual woman named Ruth added: “What really bugged me was how they treated women in religion. That just seemed ridiculous, the way they say that women should be in the home and have kids, and they emphasized women should not put career first. That really was bothersome.” DeeDee added: “So, everybody is religious, and when you ask people where they hang out they say, there’s this cool church. Yeah, I don’t want to go, and then we just stop talking or I will say the wrong thing and that just starts like a giant fight.” In an even more explicit example, a white heterosexual woman named Darcy recalled: “I was hanging in a friend’s house and this guy just yelled at me if I believe in God and I told him no and the music stopped and everybody was looking at me. It got really threatening, and the people there were religious so a pretty big fight.” Respondents noted many ways some religious people (and especially their treatment by such religious people) facilitated their desire to avoid religion.

⁴Adult members of the LDS or Mormon Church are expected to wear sacred underwear that is referred to as “garments.”

In fact, these stories became even more striking when nonreligious people discussed family members' reactions to their admission that they were nonreligious (Zimmerman et al. 2015). In such situations, family members echoed some negative religious reactions to transgender and sexual minority status (Wolkomir 2006) by symbolically attacking the people they were supposed to care about the most. As Elinor noted, these reactions often signified both disapproval and opposition to nonreligious moral decisions: "She was yelling and there was a lot of arguing like she didn't understand and I tried to explain what my views were but she pushed them aside. She said she'd pray for me." Similarly, a white heterosexual woman named Lenore noted: "[My family] was not happy, but they are always going to love me and they'll pray otherwise you're going straight to hell. So it wasn't like complete you're out of the family, but there were a lot of fights." Mirroring proposals to, e.g., "pray the gay away" (Barton 2012), some family members taught nonreligious people that their love had limits. In fact, like many sexual and gender minorities (Sumerau et al. 2015), our respondents learned that believing in "family values" does not necessarily translate into valuing the happiness of one's family members when said member disobeys familial assumptions (Zimmerman et al. 2015).

CONCLUSIONS

The people we studied were intimately familiar with the marginalization people faced by identifying as nonreligious. As a result, they became accustomed to making sense of experiences with religion in much the same way other minorities must learn to manage the ever-present articulation of other dominant norms. While many people claim moral identities by moralizing—or emphasizing the positive aspects of—religion (McQueeney 2009), our respondents used their experiences with religion to demoralize religion—or emphasize negative elements of religion—to define nonreligion as a source of morality, value, and worth. They did so by defining some religion as about conformity rather than morality, highlighting negative assumptions some religions promoted about nonreligious people, and suggesting experiences with religious people encouraged them to leave religion in search of other sources of morality.

These findings support research on moral identity construction by religious minorities (see, e.g., Loseke and Cavendish 2001; Sumerau 2012; Guenther 2014), and extend this research by revealing some ways nonreligious people—like non-heterosexual Christians (Yip 1997)—fashion moral selfhood via critiques of existing religions. Similar to some African-American gay Christian men (Pitt 2010) and some Christians navigating shifting religious norms (Moon 2004), they poked holes in religious claims by revealing situations where religious people fell short of their own morals, and arguing established "rules" did not always correlate with action considered moral or valuable (McQueeney 2009). Although researchers have devoted much attention to the ways religious minorities make sense of dominant

religious norms (Wilcox 2009), these findings suggest there may be much to learn from the ways nonreligious people navigate similar conflicts.

These findings also extend previous treatments of nonreligious people by drawing our attention to common strategies of moral identity work utilized by nonreligious people regardless of variation in self-identification, region, or other social factors. Although previous studies have focused primarily on atheists (Smith 2011; LeDrew 2013, 2015) and members of varied secular movement organizations (Hunsberger 2006; Pasquale 2010; Smith 2013b; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Guenther 2014; though see Baker and Smith 2015 and Lee 2015), such groups only make up a fraction of the people living without religion at the present stage of history (Zuckerman 2011).

In Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp (2013) study of members of an atheist group in California, they found the strategies used to create boundaries between themselves and the religious were very critical of religious individuals. Specifically, the atheists they studied constructed religious people as a threat to themselves as atheists but also more broadly to society, and depicted religious people as holding views completely opposite to their own. Guenther et al.'s findings are not all that surprising as they derive from atheist activists who have developed a strong sense of atheist identity (Smith 2013a). Our respondents were less strident in their criticism of the religious. This is likely because our respondents have varied nonreligious identities—from some more strident atheists to those who are sympathetic toward the religious. As a result, the respondents in our sample were less critical—though, of course, they were still critical as they needed to illustrate that the religious did not hold a moral high ground to construct their own sense of morality.

While the efforts of our respondents echoed previous findings concerning the importance of managing contact with and departure from religions (Guenther 2014), their experiences also revealed some ways religion may serve as a symbolic resource for nonreligious selfhood. These findings reveal the importance of exploring similar strategies of identity formation embedded within varied nonreligious identity claims, and ascertaining the ways groups within this larger population engage in similar or different strategies of moral and other identity construction in relation to religion and other nonreligious communities (Dunn and Creek 2015).

Although the strategies outlined above may provide “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer 1969)—or common ways of doing things that may be explored in various settings and contexts (Schwalbe et al. 2000)—for ongoing studies of nonreligious experience, it is important to recognize limitations of this case study. First, these findings should not be generalized to the wider population of nonreligious people or other religious minorities, but rather used to explore the ways such people—in varied regions, of varied demographic profiles, and with varied backgrounds—may accomplish the construction of nonreligious selves and moral identities. While the strategies we outline may be found in many cases, as Schwalbe and associates (2000) note, the exact content and shape of such endeavors will likely vary in different contexts, settings, and populations. We suggest, however, that our sensitizing concepts can work as the beginning of a framework for systematically

comparing and contrasting variations in the identity work of nonreligious people in different spaces and places.

Another limitation arises from the specific dimensions of this sample. Our sample is by no means a representative sample of nonreligious individuals in the United States. Due to response bias and limitations in how much funding we had to remunerate individuals, our sample is not perfect. While we outlined strategies utilized by nonreligious people unaffiliated with secular movements and organizations, such endeavors appear to take different shapes within such movements and organizations (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Guenther 2014). Further, the common strategies of nonreligious people may be deeply shaped, adjusted, informed, and nuanced by different locations (i.e., agnostic versus atheist versus spiritual but nonreligious) within the overall population. As scholars have noted concerning social movements (Barton 2012), processes of moral and other identity construction may be intimately tied to social boundaries between elements of the overall population. While only systematic research into the variety of strategies of nonreligious identity work will reveal the shape of such nuances, our analysis opens the door to such analyses by providing some strategies nonreligious people of varied social characteristics may utilize in their ongoing social lives.

In sum, to fully understand the experiences of nonreligious people, we must analyze the ways they make sense of religious assumptions and norms as well as the consequences of these actions (Sumerau 2014). This will require investigating situations where religion provides the symbolic resources necessary for establishing nonreligious selves as well as the ways religious groups respond to these developments. As our study of nonreligious people's moral identity construction reveals, these processes may be intimately tied to the social construction of moral selfhood, and efforts to demonstrate who does and does not signify the ability to provide moral examples in concrete settings. Unraveling and comparing the variations in nonreligious people's moral identity work and religious and nonreligious definitions of morality may deepen our understanding of the operations that support or subvert the role of contemporary religion and nonreligion in contemporary American society.

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