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Secular but not superficial : an overlooked nonreligious/nonspiritual identity.

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SECULAR BUT NOT SUPERFICIAL:
AN OVERLOOKED NONRELIGIOUS/NONSPIRITUAL IDENTITY

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated

to my wife, Ginny,

and my children, Phoenix, Sage, and Inanna,

who spent so many days and nights without me

so that I could bring this research to fruition.

I love you all more than words can say.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

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Since Durkheim's characterization of the sacred and profane as "antagonistic rivals," the strict dichotomy has been framed in such a way that "being religious" evokes images of a life filled with profound meaning and value, while "being secular" evokes images of a meaningless, self-centered, superficial life, often characterized by materialistic consumerism and the cold, heartless environment of corporate greed. Consequently, to identify as "neither religious nor spiritual" runs the risk of being stigmatized as superficial, untrustworthy, and immoral. Conflicts and confusions encountered in the process of negotiating a nonreligious/nonspiritual identity, caused by the ambiguous nature of religious language, were explored through qualitative interviews with 14 ex-ministers and 1 atheist minister—individuals for whom supernaturalist religion had formed the central core of identity, but who have deconverted and no longer hold supernatural beliefs. The cognitive linguistics approach of Frame Semantics was applied to the process of "oppositional identity work" to examine why certain identity labels are avoided or embraced due to considerations of the cognitive frames evoked by those labels.

Through the constant comparative method of grounded theory, a host of useful theoretical concepts emerged from the data. Several impediments to the construction of a "secular but not superficial" identity were identified, and framework of new theoretical concepts developed to make sense of them: sense disparity, frame disparity, identity misfire, foiled identity, sense conflation, and conflated frames. Several consequences arising from these impediments were explored: (1) consequences of sense conflation and conflated frames for the study of religion; (2) consequences of conflated frames for religious terminology; and (3) consequences of the negation of conflated frames for those who identify as not religious, not spiritual, or not Christian. Additionally, four types of oppositional identity work were identified and analyzed: (1) avoidance identity work, (2) dissonant identity work, (3) adaptive identity work, and (4) alternative identity work. Finally, the concept of conflated frames was applied to suggest a new interpretation of the classic Weberian disenchantment narrative.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

This is a study of nonbelievers—a vague term, to be sure, but one commonly used in reference to those who do not believe that anything supernatural exists. By supernatural, I do not mean merely "any order of things that goes beyond our understanding" (Durkheim [1912]1995:22). By supernatural, I refer specifically to concepts such as *ghosts*, *gods*, *devils*, *demons*, *angels*, *heaven*, *hell*, *spirits*, *spells*, and any other conceivable entities, powers, or realms that purportedly exist in some way outside, above, or beyond the natural cosmos. Nonbelievers in the supernatural may choose to identify with any number of labels, including *atheist*, *agnostic*, *secularist*, *pantheist*, *humanist*, *skeptic*, *rationalist*, and so forth; or they may feel no need to include their *nonbelief* as a part of their self-identities at all. I am not interested here in just any type of nonbeliever. The focus of this study is specifically those who possess what philosopher (and nonbeliever) Thomas Nagel (2009) referred to as a "religious temperament"—that is, those with the same feelings, sentiments, experiences, and concerns that are often exclusively associated with religion and/or spirituality, but who typically do not identify as either.

Many good, general qualitative studies have been published in recent years that finally allow nonbelievers to speak for themselves about what they believe and how they live their lives (e.g., Zuckerman 2008, 2011; Brewster 2014; Cimino & Smith 2014; Baker & Smith 2015; Zuckerman, Galen & Pasquale 2016). Some of the stories told by

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those nonbelievers hint at the difficulties they face with the ambiguous and vague nature of identity labels such as "religious," "spiritual," "atheist," and "agnostic." No studies thus far, however, have specifically analyzed the nature of that ambiguity and its role in the conflicts and confusion encountered when deeply religious believers deconvert from their supernaturalist, religious identities and face the arduous task of constructing new, naturalistic (meaning only "not supernatural") identities that still communicate the depth of their personal convictions.

I addressed these issues by interviewing people whose self-identities had once been thoroughly imbued with a worldview based on supernatural religious beliefs, and who subsequently abandoned those supernatural worldviews and their accompanying identities—people who Altemeyer and Hunsberger (1997) referred to as "amazing apostates." Ex-ministers offer a clear contrast between a time in their lives when religion/spirituality constituted the primary core of their personal and social identities, and a later time when, after having abandoning those beliefs and identities, they had to construct new ones. I sought ex-ministers who no longer believe any of the supernatural doctrines they had once preached, and who (with one exception) have abandoned the identity of "Christian minister." All of them continue to question and explore the "deeper" aspects of life traditionally ascribed exclusively to religion and/or spirituality. Through in-depth interviews, I asked them to explain the meanings they had for religious language, and whether they had found new language to express those meanings.

Background: Trends, Identities, and Characterizations

In the late 1990s, social scientists began to notice two trends becoming more prevalent in the American religious landscape. First, an increasing number of people were beginning to reject the identity of "religious," but continuing to identify as "spiritual"— and clearly distinguishing between the two (Hill et al. 2000; Marler & Hadaway 2002). While being religious increasingly came to be associated *only* with being affiliated with an institutional religious tradition, at the same time, being spiritual came to indicate an independent, personal search for such things as deeper meaning, value, and purpose in life, independently from organized religion. Those who identified as "spiritual but not religious" were deliberately distancing themselves from institutional religions. Many social scientists began using this same distinction (e.g., Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Roof 1999; Ellingson 2001), some going so far as to declare a "silent takeover of religion" (Carrette & King 2005) which was "giving way to spirituality" (Heelas & Woodhead 2005). Subsequently, many scholars started treating "religious" and "spiritual" as separate identity variables (e.g., Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Marler & Hadaway 2002; Schnell 2012; Streib & Hood 2016), combining the four possible answer pairs into a fourfold typology: (1) nonreligious/nonspiritual, (2) nonreligious/spiritual, (3) religious/nonspiritual, and (4) religious/spiritual.

Second, multiple large-scale, national surveys (e.g., General Social Survey, American Religious Identity Survey, National Election Study) had revealed that the percentage of religious "nones"—those who answer "nothing in particular" or "none" when asked, "What is your religion?"—had *doubled* between 1991 and 2000, from approximately 7 percent to 14 percent of the adult population (Kosmin, Mayer, & Keysar

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2001; Hout & Fischer 2002). By contrast, that number had risen only gradually over the previous 30 years—from 2.2 percent in 1960 to 7.3 percent in 1980 (Glenn 1987), then levelling off at approximately 7 percent throughout the 1980s (Hout & Fischer 2002). By 2014, the religious "nones" had grown to approximately 23 percent of the United States adult population (Lipka 2015).

Initial interpretations, especially among atheist organizations, assumed that all these so-called "nones" were nonbelievers. Closer analysis, however, revealed that only 31 percent of the "nones" (7 percent of the overall adult population), explicitly identified as either atheist or agnostic. The remaining 69 percent said their religion was "nothing in particular" because, in accordance with the new religious/spiritual distinction mentioned above, they chose not to affiliate with any organized religion. In fact, even while unaffiliated, 30 percent said that religion is still important in their lives, situating them within the nonreligious/spiritual category. Now commonly known as the "spiritual but not religious," this category has received a great deal of attention over the past two decades (e.g., Zinnbauer et al. 1997; Fuller 2001; Marler & Hadaway, 2002; Johnston 2012; Ammerman 2013; Escobar 2014; Mercadante 2014; Kenneson 2015; Packard & Hope 2015).

Unlike the "spiritual but not religious," the "nonreligious/nonspiritual" category (the "neither religious nor spiritual") has received relatively little attention from social scientists—although that trend has been steadily and rapidly increasing since 2006. The data show that the category is anything but homogeneous, and many subtle nuances remain to be explored and subcategories to be delineated. For example, the "neither religious nor spiritual" demographic is certainly not all atheists. Of the 39 percent of "nones" who said that religion is *not* important in their lives, over half still said they

believe in God or a higher power, in whatever way they define those terms (Lipka 2015). Some of those who said that they do not believe in God or a higher power nonetheless said that they *do not* accept being labeled as an "atheist." All of this begs the question: what do labels such as "religion," "spiritual," "God," and "atheist" actually mean to those in the nonreligious/nonspiritual category? And how do disparate understandings of those vague terms contribute to the task of circumscribing the subgroup boundaries within the category to recognize more precise identities?

Though little research has been conducted on them, a great many things have been *said* about nonbelievers who identify as neither religious nor spiritual, much of it derogatory and ill-informed. Whether they self-identify as *atheist*, *agnostic*, *nonbeliever*, *secularist*, *deist*, *pantheist*, *bright*, *humanist*, or *freethinker*, people who do not identify as either religious or spiritual are the targets of disdain from many directions. Pastor James Emery White, for example, asserted that people in the nonreligious/nonspiritual category "do not have much of an inner world, much less a place of hope or promise" (2014:197). Psychologist Paul Vitz wrote an entire book to argue that "the worldview of those who reject God creates problems like the meaninglessness and the alienation of modern life" (1999:xiii). Taking his assessment a step further, he proposed that "irrational, often neurotic, psychological barriers to belief in God are of great importance" (1999:5). Theologian J. P. Moreland believes that "happiness, meaning to life, and human flourishing are impossible if there is no God" (2009:152).

Special invective is reserved for the "atheist" label. Eminent scholar of religion Wilfred Cantwell Smith, for example, made the following scathing remarks in a 1963 radio broadcast: "It has been said, *and I think rightly* [emphasis added], that the only true atheist is he who loves no one and whom no one loves; who is blind to all beauty and all

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justice; who knows no truth; and who has lost all hope" (1963:138). He repeated that

appraisal at least twice more in print, adding further that the true atheist "knows no

courage and no joy," and "finds no meaning" (1972:53–54; 1979:20). The easy with

which anyone can use the Internet to "publish" anything they feel inclined to write has

lifted anti-atheist rhetoric to new heights. Using the infamous Madalyn Murray O'Hair as

a paradigm of atheism, hyperbolic political blogger Dave Jolly asserted the following

characterization of atheists:

> True atheism doesn't stop with the denial God [*sic*], but the question and rebellion
> against all authority. . . . It's not just about religious beliefs, but about every aspect of
> decency, morals and values. . . . True atheists are not just lost souls, but they are
> dangerous people. They should not be trusted. (2014)

A reader of Jolly's blog added the following comment: "Atheism is the abode of small

minds. Like animals they cannot grasp the concept and, in their arrogant ignorance they

mock what they cannot grasp." These are only a small handful (and far from the worst)

among many disparaging opinions of nonbelievers who identify as neither religious nor

spiritual. Such uncharitable opinions stem from the dichotomous relationship of the

concepts of "religious" and "secular," which have been framed over the past few hundred

years in such a way that the former represents all that is meaningful in life and the latter

represents all that is superficial.

The Religious-Secular Divide

Émile Durkheim, in 1912, explicitly laid the foundation for the strict dichotomy

between the religious and the secular. In his highly influential analysis, the *sacred* and the

profane are not merely two ends of a spectrum, similar in kind but different in degree.

Rather, the sacred and the profane represent two qualitatively different kinds of things, polar opposites, antagonistic rivals occupying "two worlds with nothing in common" ([1912]1995:36). The dichotomy is thus *absolute*, according to Durkheim. As William Swatos noted, however, the word "profane" for Durkheim simply referred to the "ordinary or everyday"—closer to the meaning of "mundane" than to "profanity" (2003:40). Hence, although sacred things are "things set apart and forbidden" ([1912]1995:44), the ordinary and everyday things from which they are set apart are not necessarily considered vulgar or obscene.

Mircea Eliade, almost fifty years later, reinforced this dichotomy. Similar to Durkheim, he envisioned an "abyss that divides the two modalities of experience—the sacred and profane" (1959:14). Eliade, however, characterized the profane in strongly negative terms, as the polar opposite of the sacred in all respects. By dubbing our species "*homo religiosus*" (1959:18), he declared religiosity the essence of being fully human. The implication for the *nonreligious* is difficult to overlook. In his rather grandiose and hyperbolic style, Eliade explained that "nonreligious man . . . assumes a tragic existence" (1959:203), and "all vital experiences . . . are deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimension" (1959:168). Eliade was not alone in this usage of "profane." According to Edward Bailey, the meaning of profane, "in ordinary British English at least, has the quality of (negative) sacredness about it: it is a moral Abomination, a doctrinal Heresy, an ontological Blasphemy" (2003:64).

Over time, scholars began increasingly to substitute "secular" for "profane" in the old dichotomy. We can observe this transition merely by looking at book titles over the years: *The Sacred in a Secular Age* (Hammond 1985), *Between Sacred and Secular* (Greil & Robbins 1994), *Beyond the Sacred-Secular Divide* (Allen 2011), *Social Identities*

Between the Sacred and the Secular (Day, Vincett & Cotter 2013), and many more.

Throughout the twentieth-century, this polarized, binary view fueled the development of

a deep-rooted conceptual framework commonly referred to as the "religious-secular

divide" (Bernstein 2009; Davaney 2009; Mack 2009; Nongbri 2013) or the "secular-

religious binary" (Hurd 2011; Bender & Taves 2012). In this scheme, the religious and

the secular are framed as diametrically opposed, antithetical life stances.

On one side of the divide, "the religious" (and its corollary, "the spiritual")

represents what is often described as *deeper*, *higher*, or *ultimate* concerns for meaning,

value, and purpose in life, as distinct from the normal, mundane concerns of everyday,

worldly living. Peter Berger conceptualized religion as "an all-embracing sacred order . . .

capable of maintaining itself in the ever-present face of chaos" (1967:51). Chaos, in this

case, entails the "anomic phenomena of suffering, evil and, above all, death" (1967:53).

Religion, in his definition, is a social institution that serves to stave off the threat of

nihilism—a "sacred canopy" under which humans in a religious society can lead

meaningful lives while keeping the meaningless futility of chaos at bay.

The positive aspects of human nature are often ascribed exclusively to religion and

spirituality. For example, in his classic work on the stages of religious faith, psychologist

and minister James Fowler declared that the deep, searching questions about the meaning

and purpose of our lives are quintessentially "questions of faith" (1981:3). Fowler used

the word "faith" the way today's authors use the word "spirituality," as something

"deeper and more personal than religion" (1981:9). Similarly, when one of his subjects

joined a discussion group at his girlfriend's church, after being nonreligious his entire

adult life, sociologist of religion Wade Clark Roof (1999) described how it "triggered

experiences of joy, optimism, and hope—*elementary religious responses*," and that

"through this reawakening of *religious emotions*, . . . he [found] himself searching in his own life *for greater depth* [emphases added]" (1999:20). By simply declaring them to be "elementary religious responses" and "religious emotions," Roof subsumed the fundamental human emotions of joy, optimism, and hope, solely within the purview of religion. And just as Fowler had done, Roof circumscribed questions of the deeper meaning and purpose of life—questions that could arise for any self-reflective human being, whether religious or not—and claimed them for religion.

On the other side of the divide, "the secular" is always defined in contradistinction to "the religious" in one way or another—as one scholar put it, the secular is "religion's universally recognized antonym" (Bailey 2003:60). I will only briefly describe the most commonly used senses, then elaborate on the sense that is most salient for this inquiry. In the *mundane* sense, "secular" is merely an adjective for places, objects, and activities that are "this-worldly" and have nothing to do with religion: hotels, grocery stores, fashion magazines, mowing the lawn, watching a movie, and so forth—any aspect of life in which religion is simply not relevant. In the *political* sense, secular and secularism refer to the separation of church and state, the political conviction that institutional religions should not have control or influence over government institutions. Secularism can also refer to the *decline of religious practice and belief*—people no longer participating in religious organizations or believing the doctrines espoused by religions. Charles Taylor suggests that this is the sense people typically have in mind when speaking of secularism (2007:2).

In his monumental work, *A Secular Age*, Taylor proposed another sense, subtly distinct from the previous one, which he calls the *pluralist conditions of belief*. He described this sense as "a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged

and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace" (2007:3). Many years earlier, Peter Berger had noted that the *pluralization of religious options* was "an important cause of the diminishing plausibility of religious traditions" (1969:55). To extend his famous metaphor, we can envision the tent flaps around the edge of the "sacred canopy" propped wide open, so that people can choose to step outside and explore other possibilities.

The concept of "secularization" refers to an overall *recession of religion from the public sphere*, described by Berger as "the process by which sectors of society and culture are removed from the domination of religious institutions and symbols" (1967:107). Since the beginning of the scientific study of religion, this so-called "secularization hypothesis" has been framed by Max Weber's notion of the "disenchantment of the world." According to the disenchantment narrative, the rational, naturalistic explanations of the world we live in, as revealed by modern science, would slowly chip away at the supernatural explanations offered by religion. By extension, religious dogmas would come to be seen as superstitions, leading inevitably to diminishing religious beliefs and ultimately to the end of traditional, institutional religion (Herberg 1962; Berger 1967; Shiner 1967; Mathewes and Nichols 2000; Furseth and Repstad 2006).

Most proponents of the secularization hypothesis and its disenchantment narrative considered religious adherence and belief essential for a healthy society, and so viewed the decline of religion as a serious threat. If the majority of the population adopted an *overly* rational and scientific worldview, they feared, society could drift toward a more secular orientation, leading to a state of disenchantment in which *a crisis in existential meaning* could potentially plunge modern society into a dysfunctional, nihilistic malaise

(Taylor 1998; Taylor 2007:299*ff*). The fear of the impending doom of religion through secularization continued through the twentieth century. Will Herberg wrote in 1962 that "secularism . . . has been recognized as a problem by many philosophers, theologians, and social scientists" (1962:149). And the Catholic bishops at the Second Vatican Council declared that "atheism must be accounted among the most serious problems of this age" (Pope Paul VI 1965).

Thus, the concept of "the secular" eventually took on pejorative meaning as it increasingly came to represent the *antithesis* of all the benefits and values that religion stands for, and came to be regarded as a threat to both religious institutions and society as a whole. This is the sense I am dealing with in this inquiry: "the secular" as the *antithesis of the religious*. In this sense, the secular represents the shallow, superficial, lower, base, material concerns of life, and an *absence* of those deeper, higher, or ultimate concerns ascribed exclusively to religion and spirituality. This meaning especially evokes a sense of the secular as the ominous specter of that chaos outside the sacred canopy, embodying *the negation* of all the meaning and values of religion. This sense is the foundation of the religious-secular divide. Caspar Melville summarized this understanding particularly well:

> Much beloved of the Islamists and evangelicals, this secularism is the handy one-word distillation for all that is wrong in the modern world. Consumerism, divorce, drugs, Harry Potter, prostitution, Twitter, relativism, Big Brother, lack of moral compass, lack of community cohesion, lack of moral values, vajazzling—all can be lumped together and explained by the word secular, a kind of contemporary contraction of heathen and barbarian, with undertones of greed, perfidity and vulgarity. (2011)

Traditionally, the label of "godless" has served as the negative epithet against nonbelievers—as in "godless heathens," or the "godless Japanese" during World War II,

and "godless communists" during the Cold War. To carry on the tradition, Franklin Graham—son of famed preacher Billy Graham—is currently promoting the negative characterization of "godless secularism" as a replacement for the now passé "godless communism" (Montgomery 2016).

In this sense, the secular is often understood in *psychological* terms, to refer to what Peter Berger called the "secularization of consciousness" (1969:4), the development of a psychological shortcoming afflicting individuals said to possess a "secular consciousness" (Peck 1997) or "secular mind" (Coles 1999). Since the 1970s, evangelical apologists and activists have deliberately characterized secular people as immoral, nihilistic, self-centered, narcissistic, or even psychotic (e.g.: Vitz 1999; Moreland 2009; Spiegel 2010; Tashman 2012). Catholic priest John Pasquini (2009) characterized disbelief in God as a psychological "personality disorder" stemming from a "distorted mindset." M. Scott Peck asserted that people who consider themselves nonreligious have a peculiar kind of self-centered consciousness, and that they are "often to experience a sense of meaninglessness and insignificance . . . despite their imagined centrality" (1997:123). Robert Coles (1999) devoted an entire book to painting a disparaging image of the so-called "secular mind," characterizing it variously as spiritual indifference (21), cold, calculating, heartless rationalism (31), sin and hedonistic temptation (35), living it up/having a good time (41), consumerism/materialism (102), self-centered, selfish living (103), immorality, or at least moral indifference (104), the embodiment of vices (106), and shallow, superficial living (106).

The above examples illustrate how the meanings of religious and secular have been framed throughout the years in such a way that "the religious" is portrayed as the sole avenue to a meaningful, fulfilled life, and "the secular" as a back alley leading to a

superficial, nihilistic life. As Abraham Maslow observed, "[v]ery many people in our society apparently see . . . religion as *the* locus . . . of the spiritual life. [It is] widely and officially accepted as *the* path, by many as the *only* path, to the life of righteousness, of purity and virtue, of justice and goodness, etc." (1964:4). According to this strict, binary dichotomy, "the religious" represents all that is profound, significant, selfless, communal, and meaningful. "The secular," on the other hand, represents all that is mundane, superficial, narcissistic, individualistic, and nihilistic, often exemplified by characterizations of absolutist ideologies, rampant materialistic consumerism, and the heartless greed of corporate business culture (e.g., Axel 1993; Coles 1999; Lozoff 2000; Moreland 2009).

This division of concerns between religious (deep, higher, ultimate) versus secular (shallow, lower, materialistic) often influences how researchers interpret the subjects they encounter in the field. Whereas observations of people showing concern over deeper meaning and value in life are categorized as religious, observations of people showing shallow concerns over petty desires, empty pleasures, and vain ambitions are counted as examples of the so-called *secular world* outside of religion. Consequently, when faced with empirical examples of self-identified *nonreligious/nonspiritual* people showing concerns for depth of meaning in life, social scientists often employ rhetorical acrobatics which allow them to subsume those observations, however tenuously, within the category of religion—because by the definitions imposed by the religious-secular divide, those people should be considered secular (Herberg 1962; Roof 1999; Besecke 2005). For example, despite the fact that his subject did not self-identify as religious, Wade Clark Roof stretched the boundaries of the "religious" category around him, because he could not bring himself to place the man within the "secular" category:

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> To think of him as a 'None' (or a nonaffiliate) overlooks the fact that something profoundly moving is happening within him. Doubt and lack of a clear conviction about what to believe do not here translate into a secular outlook; rather they appear to signify *just the opposite*—a more open, questioning posture [emphasis added]. (1999:19)

Roof thus insinuated that religious "nones" cannot feel "something profoundly moving" within them, and that a "secular outlook" is *the opposite* of an open, questioning posture.

I do not think that this was a deliberate, pernicious effort on Roof's part, but rather an indication of how the religious-secular divide is subconsciously pervasive in the way we think about such matters. The dichotomy is deeply embedded within our cognitive processes, and strewn throughout the language we use in discourse about religion versus nonreligion. It is ensconced in the fundamental metaphors that shape the way we think and speak about such things: lost/found, descend/ascend, dark/light, down/up, shallow/deep. Hence, a *lost* soul is envisioned as having *descended* into *darkness*, then raised *up* by religion to *ascend* into the *light*—it once was *lost*, but now it's *found*—out of the *darkness* and into the *light*. Entrenched that deeply within our psyches, the dichotomy typically goes unnoticed and unchallenged.

Definitional Considerations

The words of religious discourse are used in an exceptionally wide variety of disparate senses. I will not attempt here to establish necessary and sufficient attributes with which to demarcate religion from nonreligion, or spirituality from nonspirituality. Nor will I suggest rigid and limited working definitions (much less, *essentialist* definitions) for terms such as *religious*, *spiritual*, *atheist*, *agnostic*, *transcendent*, *sacred*, *soul*, *spirit*, and so forth. Rather, one objective of this study is to understand what those

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words mean for the participants of the study—that is, the *emic* meanings that *they* hold for the terms, as opposed to the *etic* meanings ascribed to them by scholars. Nonetheless, I will need to make explicitly clear a few fundamental distinctions that are too often left unacknowledged, but which will be indispensable for the analysis to come.

Figurative and Supernatural Senses of Religious Language

Most of the central religious terms (e.g., *sacred*, *spiritual*, *God*, *soul*, etc.) are associated with a wide range of meanings, which can be categorized in a number of ways. Bernard Spilka, for example, found that the multifarious meanings of "spirituality" could be sorted into three broad categories: God-oriented, world-oriented, and people-oriented/humanistic (Hill et al. 2000:57). Greenwald and Harder (2003), from a principle components factor analysis of ratings of 122 adjectives, found that four categories emerged: Loving Connection to others, Self-effacing Altruism, Blissful Transcendence, and Religiosity/Sacredness. Most religious terms, however, and the concepts associated with them, can be sorted fairly cleanly into two broad *senses*: the *figurative* sense and the *supernatural* sense. I am not suggesting that this is a strict dichotomy. Some meanings will fall into both sense categories; a few others might not fall into either. The vast majority, however—the ones most pertinent to this investigation—are mostly used in one of these two main senses. Other categorization schemes, too, can be sorted into these two broad senses. The first and third of Spilka's categories, for example, correspond for the most part to the supernatural and figurative senses, respectively. His second category could be interpreted either way, depending on the individual's worldview. The first two of

Greenwald and Harder's categories are fairly unambiguously figurative, and the second two could be interpreted either way.

To make this perfectly clear, we can examine data from a study by La Cour, Ausker, and Hvidt (2012). They produced an exhaustive list of 115 words and phrases, by asking participants from a variety of worldviews to "express freely all their associations (both positive and negative) with the word 'spirituality'" (2012:65). Discarding the negative (e.g., anti-intellectual person, self-absorbed person) and everyday (e.g., sport, diets) items as inconsequential for our purposes, we are left with 99 items. A handful of those items can be interpreted either figuratively or supernaturally, such as *awareness of the ultimate*, *searching for the sacred*, *something larger than oneself*, and even *striving for God* if "God" is understood metaphorically. The rest can be easily distinguished as either figurative or supernatural.

The figurative sense of spirituality encompasses a broad range of attitudes, interests, concerns, activities, and emotional states. From the list generated by La Cour et al., the figurative sense includes items such as *gratitude*, *love*, *joy*, *meaning in life*, *compassion*, *wisdom*, *values*, *emotive person*, *profound person*, *music*, *poetry*, *artistic*, and *willing to develop one's self*. This sense is typically articulated, both in the scholarly literature and by practitioners, with words such as *deep*, *meaningful*, *significant*, *serious*, and *profound*. It is characterized by emotions such as *compassion*, *loving kindness*, *awe and wonder*, *connectedness with others*, *cosmic connectedness*, feeling *one with nature*, and *a sense of something greater than ourselves*.

Similar to the way many scholars have attempted to define "religious" in extremely broad terms to subsume all instances of nonsuperficiality under its umbrella, others have been even more sweeping with the concept of spirituality. Consider just the two

examples: Robert Fuller, developed the following working definition for his pioneering study of the "spiritual but not religious" identity:

> Spirituality exists wherever we struggle with the issue of how our lives fit into the greater cosmic scheme of things; . . . every time we wonder where the universe comes from, why we are here, or what happens when we die; . . . when we become moved by values such as beauty, love, or creativity that seem to reveal a meaning or power beyond our visible world. An idea or practice is "spiritual" when it reveals our personal desire to establish a felt-relationship with the deepest meanings or powers governing life. People find spiritual inspiration not just in sermons, but also in books and seminars about humanity's creative potentials. (2001:8–9)

Similarly, in the introduction to a volume entitled *Spirituality and the Secular Quest*, volume editor Peter Van Ness devised the following expansive definition:

> The spiritual dimension of life is the embodied task of realizing one's truest self in the context of reality apprehended as a cosmic totality. It is the quest for attaining an optimal relationship between what one truly is and everything that is. . . . Facing outward, human existence is spiritual insofar as one engages reality as a maximally inclusive whole and makes the cosmos an intentional object of thought and feeling. Facing inward, life has a spiritual dimension to the extent that it is apprehended as a project of people's most enduring and vital selves, and is structured by experiences of sudden self-transformation and subsequent gradual development. (1996:5)

Note that, aside from a vague reference to "meaning or power beyond our visible world"—which could be interpreted either way—neither of these definitions necessarily entail a supernatural worldview at all. Defined in such sweepingly broad terms, any thoughtful, self-reflective, morally conscious, and socially responsible human being *could* very well be categorized as "spiritual," regardless of supernatural beliefs.

    The supernatural sense of spirituality unequivocally involves supernatural beliefs about the nature of reality. It can be thought of as the *literal* sense of the word, in that "spirit" is not considered a mere metaphor, but is thought to refer to some kind of ontologically real, immaterial entity, independent of the physical body—a disembodied

mind. The supernatural sense encompasses items from La Cour et al. such as: *personal relation to God*, *life after death*, *guardian angels*, *reincarnation*, *clairvoyance*, *astrology*, *occultism*, *spiritism*, and *ghosts*. People who include the supernatural sense in their spiritual identities do not consider their beliefs to be mere allegory or metaphor. Practitioners of New Age spirituality, for example, really do believe that crystals have supernatural healing powers and that mediums can communicate with the disembodied minds of people long deceased. Catholic pilgrims to Medjugorje really do believe that the Blessed Virgin Mary appeared before six children in 1981, roughly 1900 years after her lifetime. Modern, liberal theologians may have developed sophisticated interpretations of Christian doctrines which allow them to sidestep the supernatural implications, but when evangelicals speak of "the *risen* Christ," they most assuredly do not have a metaphorical interpretation in mind.

Despite attempts by many scholars to construct definitions of religion and spirituality that exclude any reference to supernatural belief, many continue to define them in supernatural terms. Eliade, for example, saw a supernatural worldview as essential to being religious, declaring religious man's very "mode of being in the world" as always believing that there is "an absolute reality, *the sacred*, which transcends this world" (1959:202). Theologian Keith Ward defined religion as "a set of practices for establishing a relationship to a supernatural or transcendent reality, for the sake of obtaining human good or avoiding harm" (2004:3). Robert Wuthnow says that, "at its core, spirituality consists of all the beliefs and activities by which individuals attempt to relate their lives to God or to a divine being or some other conception of a transcendent reality" (1998:viii). Rodney Stark more explicitly states that religion consists of "explanations of existence based on supernatural assumptions and including statements

about the nature of the supernatural and about ultimate meaning" (2004:14). Considering the bulk of those definitions, "transcendent reality" and "ultimate meaning" presumably reside someplace other than the natural universe.

As Karen Fields noted (1995:xlv–xlvi), for Durkheim, sacredness was not some supernatural attribute inherent in certain objects. Rather, he saw sacredness as a quality conferred upon objects by human beings in the very act of setting them apart from the ordinary (profane). Durkheim's argument, as Fields explained it, was that "[h]umans acting collectively make and remake this quality of sacredness but then encounter it after the fact as if it had always been built into objects and was ready-made" (1995:xlvi). Eliade expressed the exact opposite view: "men are not free to choose the sacred, . . . they only seek for it and find it by the help of mysterious signs" (1959:28). Eliade described the sacred as something otherworldly which manifests itself in certain objects and places. Humans can only know it when they encounter "an irruption [*sic*] of the sacred into the world" (1959:45). In case the supernatural component was still unclear, Eliade stated it more plainly: "for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality" (1959:12).

These two broad senses are the source of interminable confusion, misunderstanding, and false characterization. For example, when theologian Reinhold Niehbuhr wrote that "secularism is most succinctly defined as the explicit disavowal of the sacred" ([1937]1986:79), did he mean "sacred" in a figurative or supernatural sense (or both)? If someone explicitly disavows the sacred in the supernatural sense, but fully *embraces* the sacred in a figurative sense, would Niehbuhr have still considered that person secular? Similarly, Eliade declared that a man who is not religious is "a man who rejects the sacrality of the world, who accepts only a profane existence" (1959:23). For those who

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identify as neither religious nor spiritual, yet who would *not* reject the idea of sacrality in a purely figurative sense, would Eliade see them as doomed to a profane existence? The ambiguity of their language prevents us from determining how either scholar would have answered these questions. Suffice to say—as described above, and which I will discuss extensively below—secularity is most often considered a rejection of both the supernatural *and the figurative* senses of spirituality.

"Nonsuperficiality" as a Placeholder Category

Because the subject of this research is the *non*religious and *non*spiritual, suppose we approach the question of definition from the opposite direction. That is, rather than ask what we mean when we identify as "being religious" or "being spiritual," let us ask instead, what is it that we are identifying ourselves *against?* In other words, what are we intending to communicate about *what we are not?* Consider for a moment all the words and phrases enumerated in the previous section to articulate and characterize the figurative sense of spirituality: love, joy, meaning in life, compassion, wisdom, values, profound person, *et al*. As attributes of a person's identity, all of these qualities describe a particular disposition, one that is *the opposite of superficial*. Now consider the various ways in which Robert Coles characterized the "secular mind": spiritual indifference, cold, calculating, heartless rationalism, sin and hedonistic temptation, self-centered, selfish living, consumerism/materialism, *et al*. What kind of person do those describe? They all describe a mind that is *superficial*.

It follows, then, that if we want to find an identity label that indicates *a nonsuperficial disposition*, without any reference to something supernatural, we need

only find the antonym of "superficial." Open any English thesaurus, however, and you will find *no single antonym* that represents the full range of meanings that are diametrically opposite to the exceptionally broad range of meanings represented by the single word "superficial." To be sure, a good thesaurus will provide a long list of words as ostensible antonyms. Each of those words, however, only represents one aspect of nonsuperficiality; not one comes anywhere close to capturing the full range of meanings encompassed by the word "superficial." In fact, those words are really only antonyms for the very words that are listed as synonyms:

Deep	↔	Shallow
Profound	↔	Mundane
Meaningful	↔	Trivial
Significant	↔	Inconsequential
Fulfilled	↔	Empty
Serious	↔	Frivolous
Authentic	↔	Insincere
Wise	↔	Foolish

Each of those words has a single antonym that sufficiently represents the opposite of its meaning. What, then, is a sufficient antonym for "superficial"?

If we wanted to describe someone as *not superficial*, what single word or small phrase could we use to signify that? As we will discover below, a great deal hinges on this question, and as it turns out, it is far more difficult to answer than one might expect. A somewhat amusing, yet surprisingly exemplary, demonstration of this conundrum can be found on the *Stack Exchange* website in its "English Language and Usage" forum. A user named John Wu posed the following question:

> I would like to tell my friend to stop dating men who are so superficial, but state it in a positive way. Please help me complete the sentence: "You should date men who are more _____." So far the only word I've been able to come up with is "real," which seems ambiguous and lacks gravitas. (Wu 2015)

How might we answer that question? Suggestions from other readers included words such as deep, profound, serious, thoughtful, authentic, genuine, sincere, earnest, mature, wise, sensible, introspective, insightful, and perceptive. All of those words *taken together* come close to describing nonsuperficiality, but needless to say, no one could find a single word that sufficiently captured all the meaning this individual wished to express. But let us try one more option: "You should date men who are more spiritual." Everything about the *figurative sense* of "spiritual" sufficiently fulfills the meaning that John wanted to express. In this sense, *in the absence of any other options*, the word "spiritual" has becomes the *de facto* antonym of "superficial." But because it carries with it an extra set of meanings from its supernatural sense, John could run the risk of being quite misunderstood if he chose that word. His friend might think he is telling her to find someone who prays regularly, or consults psychics, or worships nature spirits.

Definitions of spirituality in the figurative sense, such as Fuller's, are so all-encompassing that they subsume any nonsuperficial sentiment or activity. We are described as "being spiritual" when we devote ourselves to such pursuits as contemplating the "big" or "ultimate" questions, searching for meaning and purpose in life, cultivating an "inner life" with mindfulness and introspective self-awareness, being of service to others, experiencing overwhelming awe and wonder, feeling "deeply moved" by a song or story, or undergoing a transformational experience. Ellen Debenport (a minister and spirituality author) wrote an article about what she calls "spiritual superfoods," a list of five "spiritual practices that are so nourishing we should partake of them every day" (2016): (1) create quiet time; (2) practice denials and affirmations; (3) speak positive words; (4) hold a vision for your life; and (5) put your spiritual/moral convictions into action. None of these experiences and practices require any supernatural

beliefs. Whatever else we may gain from partaking of them, they are all ways in which

we attempt to keep our lives from being superficial. For the purposes of my inquiry, in

lieu of an unambiguous alternative to the *figurative senses* of religiosity and spirituality,

"nonsuperficiality" will serve as a placeholder.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Prejudice and Negative Characterizations of Nonbelievers

As discussed below, identity work by nonbelievers involves, to a large extent, oppositional work against prejudice and negative stereotypes. Many studies have now confirmed the negative characterizations of, and prejudice against nonbelievers in the United States. Cragun, Kosman, Keysar et al. (2012), for example, analyzed data from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) and found that, among all respondents who identified with *none* of the religion options, only 21.6 percent reported discrimination, but of those who *self-identified as atheist or agnostic*, *42.9 percent* reported discrimination.

Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann spearheaded this new wave of research with their seminal 2006 study in which they analyzed how and why atheists are the least accepted minority in American society. They found that "out of a long list of ethnic and cultural minorities, Americans are less willing to accept intermarriage with atheists than with any other group, and less likely to imagine that atheists share their vision of American society" (2006:216). They also found that, while other minority groups (such as gays and lesbians) have slowly gained acceptance in American society, the same is not true of atheists. Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan determined that "[t]o understand a given form

of prejudice, researchers must first understand the threat that the target of prejudice is seen to pose" (2011:1190). Edgell et al. had suggested that atheists are seen as a threat to the social order because they are considered to be fundamentally untrustworthy. Gervais et al. conducted a series of social psychology experiments and found that anti-atheist prejudice is, indeed, primarily based on *distrust*.

Marcel Harper found that, because atheists remained closeted in the United States for so many years, religious apologists ran rampant with stereotypes to defame atheists. Through two studies designed to identify the most commonly held stereotypes against the nonreligious, he found, through factor analysis, six unflattering stereotypes: "skeptics," "straightforward individualists," "seekers," "judgmental cads," "critical cynics," and "hedonistic bohemians" (2007:547). In freeform response fields, respondents wrote in labels such as "aggressive," "arrogant," "empty," "evil," "freaks," "ignorant," "lost," "miserable," "sinners," "stupid," and "shallow." Stereotype labels such as these form the basis of the negative characterizations of nonbelievers that will be analyzed in more detail below.

Individual and Collective Nonbeliever Identity

The literature on secular/atheist identity work falls into three general focus areas: (1) identity formation, (2) identity management, and (3) collective identity. For purposes of this study, I am interested in the first, which entails building a new nonreligious identity after abandoning a religious one. I am especially interested in any findings of attitudes toward religious or spiritual identities, and use of identity work to deal with the social stigma of nonbelief. Kelly Church-Hearl observed in some of her participants a

reluctance to accept self-identity labels to reference their "spiritual sides." She suggested that avoiding all labels is one of the many "oppositional identity work" strategies that some nonbelievers use to cope with their stigmatized social status (2008:52). As to why nonbelievers might specifically reject the label of "religious," Church-Hearl found that many of her subjects had developed negative connotations associated with religion. "Many respondents claimed that they left mainstream religion because they felt [it] perpetuates hate, separatism, prejudice, discrimination, and oppression" (2008:27).

Barb Amandine observed similar behavior, but in response to *all* identity labels: "A majority of non-believers, when asked to categorize themselves, choose not to do so" (2011:10). Jesse Smith observed that avoiding the label of atheist "primarily has to do with its deviant and stigmatized status in American culture" (2013:84). Likewise, according to Smith and Cimino (2012), many nonbelievers avoid the label of atheist due to the many negative connotations associated with it. Some groups, therefore, try to "disassociate themselves from the atheist label and seek to promote a new secularist identity, such as the 'brights'" (2012:22). Jesse Smith suggested that many atheists, while they seek to be included in the atheist community, also seek to produce a "change in how the public views that community" (2013:96). In this sense, many atheists are attempting to *re-frame* "the secular" as something positive.

Measuring Nonreligious/Nonspiritual Identities with Surveys

Because much of the measurement of "identity" typically comes in the form of survey questionnaires, one would think such questions would be crafted with care and precision. Unfortunately, the religion-oriented questions on most of the largest surveys

are fraught with problems, often as a result of inattention to the disparate figurative and supernatural senses of the words involved, and the disparate cognitive frames those words potentially activate in the minds of the respondents (as discussed below). The consequences of ignoring the ambiguity of religious language can be quite staggering, potentially causing the research data to be a significant source of misinformation and misunderstanding. Distorted interpretations of such tainted data come from journalists and scholars alike—often from the survey organization's own reports.

Most large-scale surveys with any questions on religion contain some variation of the standard "Do you believe in God?" question. That question in itself suffers greatly from the extreme ambiguity of the word "God." The developers of the Pew Religious Landscape Survey, however, decided to extend the question and broaden its scope by asking, "Do you believe in God *or a universal spirit*?" Belief in the existence of a supernatural, personal deity, whether that deity is believed to be active in the world (theism) or to have created the world then left it alone (deism), is a different thing entirely from belief in an *impersonal* "universal spirit"—in the words of Coleman, Silver & Hood, "it would be (at the least) an emical misnomer if we were to call this 'God'" (2016:363). If we refer to both beliefs with the same term—*theism*—we erase the conceptual distinction, which is counter-productive to the rigorous needs of scholarly analysis. Instead of improving the conditions of scholarly discourse, the authors of this question increased ambiguity and confusion.

To make matters worse, when the Pew Forum presents the results of that question in tables, graphs and reports, they display the variable title only as "Believe in God"— *inexcusably leaving off the "or a universal spirit" half* of the original question. Consequently, the published results *literally* erase the distinction between those who say

they believe in a personal deity and those who say they believe in a "universal spirit."

From this we get the absurd oxymoron of the atheist who believes in God. The Pew

results indicate that 5 percent of self-identified atheists answered that they are "fairly

certain" or "absolutely certain" that God exists, leading to popular news headlines such as

"Why so-called atheists believe in God, Heaven, and even the Bible." The author even

quoted the original answer in full, then immediately dropped the "or a universal spirit"

half to make a bold, newsworthy soundbite: "The graph showed that a fraction of self-

identified atheists expressed absolute certainty that there is a 'God or universal spirit.'

That's right: *some atheists believe in God*" (Grant 2014).

None of the questions in any of the large national surveys bother to take into

account which sense (figurative or supernatural) the respondents have in mind for words

such as *God*, *spiritual*, *religious*, *sacred*, *soul*, and so forth. I have come across only one

measurement scale that recognizes the distinction between the figurative and supernatural

senses of spirituality. Cragun, Hammer, and Nielsen (2015) designed what they call the

"NonReligious-NonSpiritual Scale" (NRNSS). They recognized that the two disparate

senses of the word "spiritual" would compromise results with ambiguity, so they decided

to specify one sense over the other, and stated it clearly in the instructions to eliminate

any confusion:

> Some people use the terms "spirituality" and "spiritual" . . . as just having to do with:
> a special or intense experience, an appreciation for existence, meaning in life,
> peacefulness, harmony, the quest for well-being, or emotional connection with people,
> humanity, nature, or the universe. . . . In contrast to that broad approach, when you
> answer the items in THIS questionnaire we'd like you to think about 'spirituality' and
> 'spiritual' in the specific, SUPERNATURAL sense . . . , having to do with things which
> are beyond or transcend the material universe. (2015:39)

Although their definitional choice to alleviate the ambiguity allowed them to differentiate between "nonreligious/spiritual" and "nonreligious/nonspiritual," that choice led to the exclusion of another identity. What of those individuals who do not call themselves religious or spiritual and do not hold supernatural beliefs, but who *do* value "an appreciation for existence, meaning in life, peacefulness, harmony, the quest for well-being, [and] emotional connection with people, humanity, nature, or the universe"? In other words, what of the "nonreligious/nonspiritual/*nonsuperficial*" identity? The *secular but not superficial* are invisible to this scale. Had the researchers included a separate set of questions for the figurative sense of spiritual, they might have inadvertently created a measure for the "nonsuperficiality" variable.

Questions of religious affiliation vary significantly from one survey organization to the next. The General Social Survey has always asked, "What is your religious preference?" and included "None" among the choices, along with an open-ended "Other" option. The Pew Forum asks, "What is your present religion, if any?" Among the options is listed: "Atheist (do not believe in God)." The National Survey of Religious Identification contained the simple question, "What is your religion?," and included "None" among the litany of religious institutions. Curiously, it included both "humanist" and "agnostic" as choices, but *excluded* "atheist." It contained no questions about *belief*. The American Mosaic Project survey asked the question without ambiguity: "What religion, if any, were you raised in?" The intended sense of the word "religion" (in all these examples) is clearly an institution. The available options in the American Mosaic Project, however, only offered one choice for no religion: "No religion/Atheist/ Agnostic." And the follow up question—"And what is your current religious preference, if any?"—would be ambiguous if not for the context set by the previous question.

Asking a question in the form of "What religion are you?" is to ask a completely different question from "How religious are you?" The former is a question of *group affiliation*, the latter of *personal disposition*. The term "religion," however, is sometimes used in the sense of *personal religiosity*, while "religiosity" is sometimes indicated only by measures of church attendance. So when the Pew Forum survey puts the question in the ambiguous form of "How important is religion in your life?," the respondent's answer is significantly impacted by whether he or she thinks at that moment of "religion" in the sense of "religious affiliation" or in the sense of "traditionally religious feelings and concerns." And by not being more explicit, the developers of the questionnaire seem to have completely ignored the entire phenomenon of the "spiritual but not religious."

When the Pew results indicate that 7 percent of self-labeled atheists answered that "religion" is somewhat or very important in their lives (Pew Research Center 2015:45), what does that tell us? Are they saying that "a religious institution" is important to them or that "thinking about the ultimate questions" is important to them (for example)? We have no way of knowing, because their use of the word "religion" is too ambiguous. Further complicating the issue: what wording should be used in this context when speaking of "atheism"? Should it be referred to as a "religious group," "religious category," or "religious demographic"? Surely all these nomenclatures cannot escape the implication that atheism is somehow "religious," or at least religion-*like*; so why refer to it as "religious" at all? Some researchers today are, instead, placing nonbelief within the category of "*non*religion" (Lee 2015; Zuckerman, Galen & Pasquale 2016), which has its own definitional problems, aside from continuing to define it in relation to religion.

Even asking a question such as "How often do you think about meaning and purpose in life?" is susceptible to sense disparity. The respondent may think in terms of

general meaning and purpose in this life here and now, or of the *ultimate* meaning and purpose of existence. Someone who thinks that there is no such thing as inherent ultimate meaning and purpose in the universe (i.e., some supernatural, guiding, disembodied mind that "has a plan" for it all) may be inclined to say that they don't think about it all that often, even if he or she *does* often contemplate general meaning and purpose in life. Someone in a more critical frame of mind might even hear that question and ask, "What does 'meaning and purpose in life' even *mean*?"

All of the issues discussed above render survey data almost useless for researchers interested in measuring identity in terms of being "religious" or "*non*religious." Indeed, the very concept of "religiosity" is problematic. Some social scientists want to define religion in extremely broad, vague terms and claim some kind of universal or "implicit" religiosity in everyone (e.g., Schnell 2003; Bailey 2012). The concept of "implicit religion" is a prime example of an *etic* category defined so broadly that it can be imposed on almost anything. In fact, Karen Lord admitted that the term is "intentionally broad" (2006:205), and that "although not everything is implicitly religious, *anything can be* [emphasis added]" (2006:206). She readily admits that scholars who apply this concept "have tended to counter difficulties arising from this breadth by re-defining, refining and tailoring the construct to their particular field" (2006:206). The current study takes the opposite perspective: rather than expanding the definition of religious terms so broadly that they can subsume any and all nonsuperficiality, the boundaries of what constitutes religion and spirituality should be more clearly demarcated.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The point of departure for this study is the problem of constructing a new social

identity after shifting from one that is normative (even *reputable*) to one that is tainted

and often stigmatized. In this case, I refer specifically to someone shifting from a

religious or spiritual identity to one distinguished by nonbelief in religious doctrines in

particular and in the existence of anything supernatural in general. Such nonbelief can be

easily concealed, thus avoiding the stigmatized status by remaining only potentially

"discreditable" (Goffman 1963). All the subjects of this study, however, were specifically

"out of the closet" as nonbelievers. In the process of analyzing the data gathered from in-

depth interviews, I began to discover points of commonality among the theoretical

sources detailed below—points at which they could be woven together, complimenting

and reinforcing one another, resulting in a broader gestalt framework, its constituents

working together to form something greater than the sum of its parts.

The Spectrum of Social Stigma

Erving Goffman defined stigma as "an attribute that is deeply discrediting"

(1963:3), and made the important distinction between someone with an unmistakably

obvious stigmatizing attribute and someone with an attribute that can be easily concealed

in order to avoid the stigmatized identity. Although Goffman used terms such as

"discredited" and "tainted" synonymously with "stigmatized," and treated "normative" and "stigmatized" as binary categories, I will treat them as "graded categories" (Lakoff 1987:21; Saler 1993:xiv), suggesting a *spectrum* of graded social statuses. For example, although "discredited" can refer to an *injured* or *defamed* character, it can also refer merely to a loss of trust in someone—not necessarily a stigmatized status. "Tainted," however, has no lexical sense from which implications of *corruption* or *contamination* are absent; it unmistakably implies some degree of stigma. A similar distinction can be made on the other end of the spectrum, in that some "normative" identities—such as doctors, judges, and ministers—are perceived as more "reputable" than others.

Frame Semantics, Grounded Theory, and Cognitive Frames

The Frame Semantics approach to linguistic analysis is a uniquely suitable compliment to Glaser and Strauss's (1967) "grounded theory" approach to generating theory that emerges from qualitative research data. Semantics is the study of the *meanings* of words. Frame Semantics is "the study of how . . . we associate *linguistic forms* (words, fixed phrases, grammatical patterns) with the cognitive structures—the *frames*—which largely determine the process (and the result) of interpreting those forms" (Fillmore & Baker 2009:314). The objective of grounded theory is to understand the standpoint of those under study by paying close attention to *the words* (i.e., linguistic forms) they use to express their thoughts, attempting to discern "nuances of [their] language and meaning" (Charmaz 2006:32–34). Fillmore and Baker explain that "the ground observations about Frame Semantics must be *the ways in which users of the language understand* what is communicated by their language [emphasis added]"

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(2009:320). Thus, Frame Semantics provides a means of achieving the objective of generating grounded theory. With the Frames Semantics approach, those nuances of meaning can be uncovered by excavating the underlying cognitive frames that constitute those meanings.

Cognitive frames can be thought of as structures of meaning built from interconnected collections of beliefs, images, sensory impressions, knowledge, patterns of practice, emotions, attitudes, and judgements, all bundled into organized packages in our brains (Fillmore & Baker 2009:314). As Lakoff explained, "all words are defined relative to conceptual frames." (2004:xv). Thus, it is important to understand that a cognitive frame is much more than a dictionary definition; it is an entire "conceptual representation, or mental model" (Wendland 2010:28). When we hear a word, our brains do not function like computers (Epstein 2016) by searching for the word in a database and retrieving its definition. Our brains do not think in dictionary definitions; they think in *frames*. According to Lakoff, cognitive frames are "*physically* realized in the neurocircuitry of [our] brain[s]" (2008). Words and other symbols are like triggers that activate those circuits. "When you hear a word, its frame (or collection of frames) is activated in your brain" (Lakoff 2004:xv). An important consequence of this biological reality, as Ernst Wendland explained, is that "one cannot fully comprehend the meaning of a single word without access to all the essential background knowledge that relates to that word" (2010:30). In other words, you cannot lookup the *full meaning* of a word in a dictionary, because meaning consists of all the cognitive frames activated in our brains that shape our understanding of the symbols of communication (Fillmore & Baker 2009:317).

All that being said, the most effective and efficient way to grasp the concept is by example, and Fillmore and Baker provided a clear illustration. Imagine you see a group of children entering a house, carrying brightly wrapped boxes with ribbons and bows. The scene is likely to activate the BIRTHDAY PARTY frame in your mind, leading you not only to infer that the children are going to a birthday party, but also "to expect that the children's experiences during the time of the party will include games, toys, and cake, and lighted candles on the cake, as well as a singing of the birthday song" (2009:315). Far more than the mere dictionary definition of "birthday party," all of these assumptions, along with all of your memories of birthday parties that you have experienced yourself, comprise the frame in your mind that gives meaning to what you have seen (and to the symbolic phrase "birthday party").

Robert Entman distinguished four locations where frames affect social interactions and events: the *text* (any form of symbols used for communication), the *culture* (the "stock of commonly invoked frames" (1993:52) we are socialized into), the *communicator* (someone who speaks a word with a certain frame in mind), and the *receiver* (someone who hears the word which activates a cognitive frame). Put another way, frames are "embedded in personal, social, and institutional roles" (Shmueli, Elliot, & Kaufman 2006:217). The "texts" I am concerned with in this study are (1) the words, images, testimonials, etc. that constitute the stigmatizing frames held by believers about nonbelievers, and (2) the field of identity labels available to nonbelievers for communicating social identities. As we analyze various types of frames discussed below, we will often need to recognize the location in which the frame resides.

For the remainder of this study, I have adapted a typographical convention from Lakoff and Johnson (1980) by rendering the names of cognitive frames in SMALLCAPS, in

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the same way that they rendered names of metaphors. When referring specifically to identity *labels*, the names of those labels will always appear in quotation marks. In the coming pages, each time you read the name of a frame or identity label, take a moment to observe everything that arises in your mind.

Identity Frames and Characterization Frames

Much of the literature on conflict management focuses on the mediation or negotiation of what are known as "intractable conflicts"—conflicts that seem impossible to resolve, either because the differences are too great or the parties involved are too difficult and stubborn. Examples include environmental justice disputes, racial and ethnic strife, and territorial disputes. The conflicts between believers and nonbelievers quite often fall into this category. Social scientists researching the techniques of intractable conflict mediation recognize that the two parties in such conflicts understand a situation or event in completely different ways, and that the source of the conflict can be illuminated by analyzing the disparities in the cognitive frames that form each side's understanding of identity labels. As Shmueli et al. explained: "As lenses through which disputants interpret conflicts, divergent frames limit the clarity of communication and the quality of information, and they encourage escalation" (2006:217). Frame analysis allows mediators to determine how each conflicting party views the other, and with that understanding, attempt to resolve the conflict by reframing one or both views.

In this approach, "a frame is a way of labeling these different individual interpretations of the situation" (Lewicki, Barry, & Saunders 2016:142–143). The analytic techniques of Frame Semantics can prove useful for the task of identifying,

labeling, and "unpacking the multiple frames disputants hold to get a clearer picture of the conflict's drivers" (Campbell & Docherty 2004:769). In the same-sex marriage debate, for example, we can see how communication between the opposing sides is severely hampered by recognizing that those opposed to same-sex marriage are characterizing these relationships with the DEVIANT SEX frame, while the other is characterizing them with the LOVING COUPLE frame. On a broader scale, after the mass murder of 49 people at an Orlando LGBTQ nightclub, some few "supporters" of the attack, in an attempt to justify the murders, invoked the anti-gay SEXUAL PERVERT frame (Tashman 2016) and PEDOPHILE frame (Rajaee 2016) to activate negative cognitive frames in the minds of their listeners. During their filibuster, democratic leaders attempted to humanize the victims by reading detailed personal stories of each victim, for hours on end, in order to activate positive cognitive frames such as the LOVING SON/DAUGHTER frame, the UPSTANDING CITIZEN frame, the BRIGHT FUTURE frame, and many others. Two concepts developed by intractable conflict mediation researchers have proven useful for the present study: "identity frames" and "characterization frames."

Identity frames describe how individuals or groups view *themselves*, derived from such sources as "demographic characteristics, place or location, roles they play, interests they hold, and institutions with which they are affiliated" (Campbell & Docherty 2004:774). For example, a nonbeliever might hold what could be called the RATIONALIST identity frame, considering qualities such as being *level-headed*, *clear thinking*, and *unimpressed by specious reasoning* to be important parts of his or her identity. According to Campbell and Docherty, identity frames are "a major contributor to dispute intractability." Threats to self or group identity (even if only perceived and not real) are a major source of tension that can drive a conflict into an intractable state. Identity frames,

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unfortunately, are also "one of the least malleable frames over time" (2004:774).

Shmueli et al., however, assert that changing each side's identity frames "is not necessary for managing conflicts or reaching agreements" (2006:211). Instead, they and other researchers recommend focusing on changing characterization frames in order to resolve the conflict.

Characterization frames (sometimes called "stereotyping frames") describe how individuals or groups view *others* (Burgess 2003; Campbell & Docherty 2004:775). In intractable conflicts, characterization frames are typically used to delegitimize the other party's position, to denigrate the character of the opposing party, or even to dehumanize the opposition outright. For example, on one side, a Christian fundamentalist might hold the IMMORAL ATHEIST characterization frame for nonbelievers, convinced that nonbelievers cannot be trusted because they have no ultimate reason to be ethical; on the other side, an atheist might view Christian fundamentalists as embodying the SELF-RIGHTEOUS MORALIZER characterization frame, trying to impose their absolutist, dogmatic moral rules upon the rest of society. Negative characterization frames are the cognitive impressions that fan the flames of prejudice, resentment, and hostility toward others. They are, however, easier to change than identity frames. In order to make any progress toward resolution, therefore, researchers advise that "stakeholders are better off focusing on reframing characterization frames" (Shmueli et al. 2006:211).

Oppressive Identity Work and Oppositional Identity Work

Social psychologists Michael Schwalbe and Douglas Mason-Schrock (1996) defined "identity work" as "anything people do, individually or collectively, to give

meaning to themselves or others." More importantly, they explained that identity work is "largely a matter of signifying, labeling, and defining" (1996:115). Such *signifying*, *labeling*, and *defining* inevitably involves words and the cognitive frames that those words activate. As they explained, identity itself "is not a meaning but *a sign* [i.e., label] *that evokes meaning*, in the form of a response [i.e., frame] aroused in the person who interprets it" (1996:115). Note the similarity in language of that last sentence to the way Lakoff, Fillmore, and Baker describe "evoking" cognitive frames. Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock analyze "identity-making as cultural struggle" between dominant and subordinated social groups engaged in two types of subcultural identity work: "oppressive" and "oppositional."

   Oppressive identity work occurs in a process called "othering," in which a dominant social group stigmatizes a subordinated group (or at least "taints" their identities) by imposing disreputable identity attributes on its members (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996:139)—in other words, by generating and imposing *characterization frames*. In a now seminal paper in the growing research on prejudice against atheists, Edgell et al. demonstrated this exact process by uncovering "the degree to which atheists represent a symbolic 'other' against which some Americans define themselves as good people and worthy citizens" (2006:214). They found that many Christian Americans hold stereotyped impressions of atheists, typically imagined as an individual who lacks concern for the common good of society and is against putative "traditional family values." Two common types stood out:

> Some people . . . associate [atheists] with illegality, such as drug use and prostitution—
> that is, with immoral people who threaten respectable community from the lower end
> of the status hierarchy. Others saw atheists as rampant materialists and cultural elitists
> that threaten common values from above—the ostentatiously wealthy who make a

lifestyle out of consumption or the cultural elites who think they know better than everyone else. (2006:225–227)

Edgell et al. thus uncovered two prime examples of negative characterization frames produced by a dominant group through oppressive identity work which we might call the LOWER-CLASS CRIMINAL frame and UPPER-CLASS ELITE frame, respectively—products of Christian oppressive identity work against nonbelievers.

Oppositional identity work occurs when a marginalized social group resists, or comes to terms with, the tainted or stigmatized identity attributes imposed upon them by the dominant group. Members of the marginalized group must "transform discrediting identities into crediting ones" (Schwalbe & Mason-Schrock 1996:141), redefine the identities in some way to render them less discrediting, or establish new identities. In her work on atheism as a minority identity in Appalachia, Kelly Church-Hearl (2008) utilized Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock's two types of identity work to describe the struggles of non-Christians in a region dominated by conservative Christians. According to Church-Hearl, "based on participants' reports, many Christians engage in . . . 'oppressive identity work' by claiming that atheists and naturalists lead immoral lives" (2008:48–49). The non-Christians thus had to engage in oppositional identity work to find strategies to counteract the negative stereotyping imposed by the dominant Christian culture. Church-Hearl cataloged the strategies she heard from her respondents, including: staying "in the closet," avoiding labels, exhibiting superiority, using humor when dealing with Christians, being confrontational by invalidating their beliefs asking impossible questions that Christians can't answer, and seeking social support from other non-Christians through books, the Internet, and meetup groups (2008:53–61).[1]

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[1] I am indebted to Kelly Church-Hearl for pointing me toward the work of Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock.

The theoretical frameworks detailed above weave together to form a cohesive whole. The linguistic technique of frame analysis offered by Frame Semantics lends substance to the concepts of identity and characterization frames utilized in the field of intractable conflict mediation by analyzing them as *cognitive frames*. That combination then allows us to flesh out the social psychological concepts of oppressive and oppositional identity work by analyzing them in terms of characterization and identity frames. Uncovering and deconstructing the stereotyping characterization frames located within the culture of the dominant group, and identifying the various ways they might be manipulated in the process of oppositional identity work, may allow the identity frames of the subordinated group to be reasserted.

Research Questions

What are we to make of nonbelievers who self-identify as neither religious nor spiritual, yet who demonstrate the nonsuperficial disposition of the figurative sense of spirituality? When faced with such individuals in the field, social scientists often employ rhetorical acrobatics to subsume those observations, however tenuously, within the categories of "religious" and/or "spiritual," because they have difficulty categorizing them as "secular" (e.g., Herberg 1962; Roof 1999; Besecke 2005; Streib & Hood 2016). When studying individuals who do not fit into predefined identities, we need to take an *emic* approach and listen to how they identify and describe themselves, then attempt to discern new categories, or whole new vocabularies if needs be, to avoid misrepresenting

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them. My aim in this research is to explore possible answers the following questions with regard to this particular segment of the "neither religious nor spiritual" population:

(1) How do they go about forming and articulating an identity of their own when our culture has never developed the language to speak about a nonsuperficial life without falling back on religious/spiritual language with its supernatural connotations?

(2) What new terms or metaphors, if any, have they come up with to express the same aspects of their personalities that "Christian minister" once expressed?

(3) How do they deal with the tainted or stigmatized status of their new "nonbeliever" identities?

(4) Because they do not fit the stereotypical characterization of secular people—that is, as superficial—how do they deal (if at all) with the fact that some believers might deny that they are secular and label them as "spiritual" because they fit the figurative sense of that identity?

(5) If someone does *not* want to identify as "religious" or "spiritual," because they do not want to imply that they hold supernatural beliefs, how do they communicate an identity that relates the fact that they are not superficial? In other words, what commonly understood term (or phrase) could be used as an identity label for people who are *secular but not superficial?*

CHAPTER IV

METHODS

Grounded Theory

I entered into this study with no fully-formed theoretical framework, just a general

notion—based on preparatory research and prior exploratory observations—that George

Lakoff's technique of cognitive frame analysis might prove useful. I knew my goal was

to make sense of the fact that so many thoughtful, self-reflective people, who had been

deeply religious all their lives, now have trouble identifying as religious or spiritual.

But at the outset I had no idea what theoretical frameworks might help make sense of it

all. Glaser and Strauss (1967) designed their "constant comparative method" (described

in more detail below) specifically for this research scenario, insisting that "the initial

decisions are not based on a preconceived theoretical framework" (1967:45). Their

"grounded theory" approach formed the foundation of my methodology.

As Kathy Charmaz points out in her exposition of grounded theory, theories are not

discovered, they are *constructed*. But such theories are not built out of thin air. Rather,

"we *construct* our grounded theories through our past and present involvements and

interactions with people, perspectives, and research practices" (2006:10). In other words,

we begin with what Herbert Blumer called "sensitizing concepts" (1969:147–148),

accumulated from prior reading, research, and experience. The sensitizing concepts

described in the Introduction led me to ask the questions upon which this study is based. As Charmaz explained it, to generate grounded theory "we begin by being open to what is happening in the . . . interview statements so that we might learn about our research participants' lives, . . . study how they explain their statements, . . . and ask what analytic sense we can make of them" (2006:3).

Grounded theory is built through a continuously iterative process of coding data as it is gathered, analyzing the codes to look for any emerging patterns or concepts, gathering more data and revisiting previous data to constantly compare one to the other. This process is repeated until nothing new emerges (the point of saturation), all the while constantly revisiting the literature looking for anything that may help make sense of the concepts emerging from the data. In this way, the researcher is "forced to develop ideas on a level of generality higher in conceptual abstraction than the qualitative material being analyzed" (Glaser & Strauss 1967:114). Thus, rather than a method of only *applying* pre-developed theory to the data, this is an analytic inductive method designed to systematically *generate* theory that "corresponds closely to the data" (Glaser & Strauss 1967:114). In other words, "grounded theory" is grounded in the data.

Sampling

As stated above, to answer my research questions I needed participants who had been *deeply* religious for most of their adult lives, who stopped believing the supernatural worldview of their religions and subsequently left religion altogether, and who were still the same thoughtful, self-reflective people they had been. Additionally, I needed people who were not concealing the fact that they are nonbelievers, who had publicly come out

of the closet, and thus had to engage in managing the stigma of a nonbeliever identity and to construct new identities to replace their "believer" identities. To find such people, as a reasonable theoretical source, I sought ex-clergy who no longer believed the doctrines of their former religions and who were publicly open about their deconversions.

Twenty years ago it may have been nigh impossible to find openly nonbelieving ex-ministers. But between the Internet and the proliferation of local meetup.com groups, such people can finally be seen and heard. Random sampling was not an option in this situation because the number of openly nonbelieving ex-ministers is so miniscule and difficult to find that a random sample would be impossible. Under these conditions, *opportunity* and *snowball* sampling are the most appropriate sampling methods. I was fortunate to be able to begin with opportunity sampling to recruit four participants who I already knew through my participation over the past 10 years in secularist groups in two midsize, Midwestern cities. All four enthusiastically agreed to be interviewed, and one put me in contact with another ex-minister he knew.

Ex-ministers being so few and far between, I knew no one else who could give me referrals, and Google searches for terms such as "ex-minister" or "ex-clergy" revealed nothing. So to find more participants, I had to improvise on the traditional snowball sampling method by following leads on websites, blogs, podcasts, and so forth—a sampling method I began to call "cyber snowball sampling." Roughly two years before I submitted the proposal for this study, I began to write down the names of any ex-clergy I came across on the Internet. Having been engaged with the online nonbeliever community since the early 1990s (before the World Wide Web, when we communicated through LISTSERVs, and USENET groups), I have gained an extensive familiarity with the locations of nonbelievers on the Internet. Some ex-ministers contributed to group

blogs on sites such as patheos.com and freethoughtblogs.com. Some maintained their own blogs, which were linked to from other secularist sites. Several had published books about their deconversions, and I heard them being interviewed on podcasts such as *The Humanist Hour*, *The Free Thought Prophet*, *The Thinking Atheist*, *The Friendly Atheist*, and *Progressive Spirit* as I listened to them to and from work. Sometimes one ex-minister would mention the name of another ex-minister, and I would search for that name. I was also fortunate that several members of The Clergy Project[2] came out publicly as nonbelievers during that time period.

By the time I received approval from the Institutional Review Board and was ready to begin soliciting participants, I had gathered a list of over 40 ex-clergy. I searched for their names on Google and attempted to find contact information for them on websites, blogs, podcasts, and social sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and AtheistNexus.com. I was able to obtain some form of contact information for 25 of the names (email addresses, Facebook accounts, or blog contact forms). After multiple attempts—sometimes through multiple channels—to contact each of them over a period of roughly two months, I received responses from 12, and was able to successfully schedule interviews with 10. Having been involved with the nonbeliever community for so many years, I had an "insider" status that allowed me to establish trust and rapport more easily than if I had been an unknown outsider or someone from a religious organization.

Of the 15 participants interviewed in this study, eight had been more or less theologically liberal ministers (Presbyterian, Methodist/Quaker, United Church of Canada, Catholic, two Independent Baptist, Black Baptist, and Progressive Evangelical),

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2 The Clergy Project is a private and anonymous online forum for ministers who have stopped believing but are still "in the closet" and typically still working as ministers.

six had been theologically conservative (three Southern Baptists, one Independent Baptist, and two Pentecostals), and one, from the United Church of Canada, described himself as "right-of-center." One participant was black, the other 14 were white. Three participants were women, the other 12 were men. Ages ranged from 36 to 81, with a mean of 52 and median of 56. Number of years in active ministry ranged from 5 to 35, with a mean of 18 and median of 20. The number of years since they left the ministry had two outliers: 1.5 years and 49 years. Without those two outliers, the number of years ranged from 5 to 12, with both mean and median of 7 years. Finally, 14 of the participants were *ex*-clergy, and one was actually still an active minister who had come out publicly as an atheist, and so was going through a very similar process of finding new labels to manage the stigma and communicate identity.

Data Collection

After shedding their former religious identities, some ex-clergy began writing blogs to both share their arduous deconversion experiences and, more importantly for this study, to continue doing what made them become ministers in the first place: exploring, and discussing matters of substance. During the time I was attempting to make contact for interviews, I began sifting through these blogs looking for material that addressed my research questions. I found some data of interest in the blog posts, but much of it proved to be too general for my specific questions, and thus of limited use.

The use of in-depth, semi-structured interviews encourages participants to be more focused and go into greater depth, allowing insight into their own interpretation of the words they use and the identities they choose (Charmaz 2006:25–27). To say that I took a

decidedly *emic* approach to the collection and analysis of data means that I considered the words, definitions, and cognitive frames drawn out of the participants with searching questions as paramount to gaining insight into their understandings of their identities and situations. As a purely *emic* endeavor, interviews were designed to elicit rich explanations from participants about why they chose to accept or reject specific identity labels, and what those labels mean to them.

I conducted interviews from March through May of 2016. Interview durations ranged from 44 minutes to 2 hours 44 minutes, with a mean of 1:30 and a median of 1:20. I conducted four of the local interviews in-person at the participant's location of choice—either at a coffee shop or in the participant's home—and recorded the interviews with a Zoom H1 professional audio recorder. The fifth local participant preferred to be interviewed over the phone, so I interviewed him, along with the 10 geographically distant participants, with Skype.

The Skype application can connect users for an audio or video call through the Internet, and for a small fee, Skype can even be used to call telephones, thus allowing researchers to efficiently and affordably include participants from virtually anywhere in the world (Deakin & Wakefield 2014; Iacono, Symonds & Brown 2016). Skype conversations can also be easily recorded. I recorded all remote interviews with the Audio Hijack application by Rogue Amoeba Software, which has the ability to separate each side of the conversation onto the left and right channels. I transcribed all interviews in their entirety with the Express Scribe transcription application by NCH Software, and replaced real names with pseudonyms for all participants. All data was stored in an Apple Disk Utility encrypted disk image and backed up to an encrypted thumb drive.

CHAPTER V

FINDINGS

Salient Characteristics of the Participants

Deeply Religious Identities

All of the participants in this study had been deeply devoted to their religious

beliefs, feelings, and practices for many years—devoted enough to dedicate their lives to

their religions. As ministers, their religious convictions formed the core of their personal

and social identities. Most had been religious all their lives, and many had parents or

other relatives in the ministry. Evan, for example, was a fifth-generation Baptist minister

whose great, great grandparents came to the United States from England as missionaries

to Native Americans. He preached his first sermon at the age of 15 and was ordained

at 18. He recalls how much religion saturated his identity:

> Religion was not something I *did*, religion was something I *was*. I mean, it was the air I
> breathed and the water I drank. In my home *everything* centered around religion. Nothing
> else *mattered*. We were taught that your sole purpose of being here on the Earth is to
> glorify God. And I'd never questioned that.

Melissa's parents got "baptized in the Holy Spirit" when she was a toddler, and raised her

in a non-denominational Charismatic church where her father was the worship pastor.

From an early age, she recalls, she had always "filled leadership voids wherever they

were," leading children's ministries in middle and high school. Her vocation in ministry began with a traditional "calling":

> I believed that I was hearing God's voice. I believed that that was what I was called to *do*, was to lead and speak his truth and speak his words. And it was confirmed in the fact that people listened, and people followed my lead. . . . I wanted to help people find God's will for their lives, and then help encourage them and equip them on that journey.

Others became actively religious during high school or college. Luke, for example, had a "conversion experience" at the age of 19, and says that he was a "Jesus Freak" in the '70s (complete with "bell bottom jeans" and playing in a Christian Rock band). Before doubts began to creep into his mind in 2005, he had spent 15 years as the senior minister at one of the largest congregations in the United Church of Canada, and was convinced that his religion was the "one true faith":

> To be a spiritual person just was *who I was*. My faith infused almost every facet of my life. I couldn't separate it out and categorize it, and say that I was spiritual in this area but not in this area. It was just sort of who I was as a person. It informed everything, from my sense of humor to, obviously, my activities throughout the day—of course, I was in *ministry* so, I mean, it's my *job*.

Prior Supernatural Worldviews – Disparate GOD Frames

Before they stopped believing, their worldviews consisted of supernatural cognitive frames. Almost all of them had conceived of God, to a greater or lesser extent, as a supernatural *person* who was capable of emotions (i.e., love, jealousy, anger), who listened to prayers, and who could intervene in their lives even though he (and it was always a "he") existed "beyond" or "outside of" the natural world. Their GOD frames, however, were far from identical. Most of the theologically conservative participants held a GOD frame clearly constituted by the image of the Judeo-Christian deity as described in

the Old Testament. Kenneth and Daniel, for example, were both raised in extremely

conservative Christian families. Daniel was raised Pentecostal, but drifted away from its

major tenets after joining a small "Hipster" church (McCracken 2010) where the pastor

encouraged him to enroll in a Southern Baptist seminary. Kenneth grew up in a Southern

Baptist megachurch in Mississippi. At age 15, he was the first in his family to become

deeply involved in the church when a friend invited him to an evangelical youth

conference. Even as a teenager, Kenneth had always been "very passionate about

studying the New Testament and studying the first-century church." Both Daniel and

Kenneth, along with others, held many traditional cognitive frames of a personal,

supernatural deity, including the CREATOR GOD frame and the LOVING FATHER GOD frame:

> DANIEL: [God was] the creator of the universe, redeemer, person running the show.
> Especially at the seminary, I would have defined it as *omniscient*, *omnipresent*, separate
> from creation. You know, like, I would have used all those terms.

> KENNETH: Well, you know, honestly it meant the traditional, evangelical Christian
> picture of God, that was singular creator, Trinitarian Christian theology. I believed God
> was a father figure. I saw him very much as a loving, caring person. *Definitely* as a
> person. Not just *any* person, but a person with whom you're supposed to have a very
> deep and personal intimate relationship.

Those who had been theologically liberal also conceived of God as a distinct,

supernatural *being*, but the GOD frame in their minds was not quite as well-defined or

anthropomorphic. Aaron actually did not believe in the existence of a supernatural deity

in his youth, despite the fact that his father was a prominent, progressive evangelical

leader. He started believing when he had a "conversion experience" in high school.

Throughout his years in ministry, he says his "theology kept changing," and he did not

hide that from his followers. Bethany was raised in a liberal Catholic family, with a

strongly devout mother. She considered becoming a nun, but decided to study theology at

a liberal Jesuit seminary, with plans to become a hospital chaplain. Both Aaron and

Bethany used more amorphous language to describe what might be called the general

LOVING GOD frame:

> AARON: God was *all-loving*. That was the primary identification. I believed that there
> was a *personal God* who was trying to communicate *directly* with me. And I was doing
> everything I could to open up that channel of communication, and to hear that voice.
> Obviously at that point I was thinking there *is* this God, who is trying to communicate
> with people. I definitely felt there was a God out there.

> BETHANY: Initially, God was just this loving *being* that wanted so much to share his love
> with humanity, and that we were just bad, because we continually rejected it, but that
> God was always calling us to relationship. God never stopped being that separate being.

Cheryl's GOD frame was even less clearly defined. She had been raised in a family

that attended a liberal, social justice-oriented congregation in the United Church of

Canada, where she says they never did things like reciting the Nicene Creed. Although

she still thought of God as a *being*, in some nebulous way, the GOD frame she absorbed

from her upbringing bordered on the metaphorical GOD IS LOVE frame:

> Well, I *think* I had this idea that God was a *being*. But it was more—like, we used
> language like "love," and the conversation was always about "God is love" and stuff like
> that. So, like, there were no *pictures* of God around my church.

As she grew older, and especially when she attended theological college, her conception

of God became even less substantial; by the time she graduated, she no longer thought of

God as an ontologically separate *being* at all. Even though the GOD IS LOVE frame in her

mind had become pure metaphor, the language she used when talking about God still

carried the implication of something separate from, and larger than the natural world,

something like the HIGHER POWER frame:

There was this *being* which was morphing into a "force," or a "power," or something. Like, I didn't think of heaven as a place where people went when they died and where God *lived*. Right? I would have said that God was explored as a *concept* at that time. But I know that I talked to my *children* about God. So I *do* think that I had a sense of a *presence* that we could draw on for support and for comfort and stuff.

These are only a few examples of the disparate frames among Christian believers for what is arguably one of the most foundational concepts of their religion. We see such a wide swath of contradictory GOD frames that it should be readily apparent to any social scientist studying religion that the simplistic survey question, "Do you believe in God?," will inevitably yield essentially meaningless results unless further questions clarify what the respondent *means* by "God." Such frame disparity is not confined to the "god" concept. As I will examine below, believers from different denominations hold disparate frames for the very institutions and activities that we collectively identify as "religion" and "spirituality."

Gradual Deconversions

Many of the participants said that they had either always entertained doubts, or had started doubting early on. Several started doubting to the brink of disbelief as a result of the rigorous course of study they experienced in their seminary training. Others only started doubting later in their careers. Regardless of when they started doubting, their journeys away from belief shared many basic features. Doubts crept into their minds slowly but tenaciously, typically over a period of two to five years (sometimes longer), during which they read widely, reflected deeply, and struggled with the conclusions they eventually could no longer avoid:

EVAN: We were taught that your sole purpose of being here on the Earth is "to glorify God." And I'd never questioned that. I *began* to question when I was in my sophomore year in college. Well, I struggled and struggled, talked to different professors, tried to talk to my father, tried to talk to other ministers, and I didn't get good answers.

In addition, some of those who had been theologically conservative described emotional turmoil during the process:

PAUL: My *belief* in God and Christ was all wrapped in a great deal of *fear*. And so when I was challenged, like, I was *terrified*. Because I *realized* my theology was kind of like a Jenga block tower—that all it would take was one of the more important blocks to be taken out, and the whole thing could come crumbling down. And I was really in a cold sweat, terrified over that.

The long journey out of supernatural religious beliefs, for all 15 participants, involved a great deal of reading and discussion about theology, philosophy, and history. Most said that they started learning more about the physical and life sciences, citing specific physicists, cosmologists, and biologists who strongly influenced their worldviews:

JAMES: I started reading Carl Sagan. Then I started reading and listening to all the lectures from Neil deGrass Tyson. Then I started reading *philosophy*. Going back to— I'd never read *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. I started reading Plato. I just started reading everything I could get my hands on.

Some—especially those who had been theologically conservative—said that they began to learn facts about the Bible and the history of Christianity that they had never been exposed to, facts that contradicted what they had always been led to believe. Many also began, for the first time, to read religious and philosophical authors outside the literature of their own denominations. Some learned this information in seminary, others discovered it on their own as they attempted to answer nagging questions. Over time, they began to notice that certain beliefs no longer made sense, and that the answers

offered by their religions were unsatisfactory (phrases like "didn't make sense anymore"

and "didn't get good answers" were common). Eventually, the arguments against their

supernatural worldviews simply began to make more sense. Finally, they came to realize

that they no longer believed that a supernatural deity exists:

> BETHANY: God never stopped being that separate being. It's just that, at one point I
> realized *I was the architect* of this deity that I claimed to worship. . . . And then, it was
> just a matter of me then reconciling myself to this new worldview.

Subsequent Naturalistic Worldviews

Once they realized that they no longer believed in the existence of a supernatural,

personal deity, they quickly came to the conclusion that nothing supernatural exists:

> LUKE: Do I believe that there's an invisible sky god? No. Do I believe that there is a
> force beyond ourselves? You know, right now I'd say no. I pretty well think this is it. I do
> not for a moment believe that there is an external, objective spiritual force that's acting
> upon us. I have no evidence that even *suggests* that.

When Luke says he does not believe that there is a "force beyond ourselves," he is

referring specifically to the concept of a *supernatural* force, not merely a vague notion of

"something greater than ourselves." The disparate senses of that concept are a common

source of confusion. Christopher Lasch, in his famous work on narcissism, defined God

in the following vague sense: "In religious terms, the revolt against nature is also a revolt

against God—that is, against the reality of *our dependence on forces external to*

ourselves [emphasis added]" (1978:244). Lasch was quite possibly echoing

Schleiermacher's assertion that the "feeling of absolute dependence" constitutes the

essence of religion ([1930] 1999:12ff). Regardless, as Durkheim so painstakingly

established, a sense (or feeling) of a "force beyond ourselves" need not be conceived in

supernatural terms. We experience *society* itself, after all, as a force greater than ourselves, upon which we are absolutely dependent.

Several participants mentioned conversations with former colleagues, congregants, and friends who deny that they can possibly be content with life if they really think that no God exists and that no afterlife awaits them—a view we could call the NIHILISTIC ATHEIST frame:

> STEPHEN: In dealing with people, both publicly and privately, it's a common thing that I have to deal with. Because it's impossible for some people to wrap their minds around: "How can your life have meaning and purpose if there is no God?" And I say, well, all I can tell you is that it *does*, that life in and of itself—because I'm a sentient, thinking, rational being—*does* have meaning and purpose.

Fear of losing all meaning and purpose in life without God is a common theme of Christian apologetics (e.g., Warren 2002; Moreland 2009). Self-styled "New Age gurus," such as Deepak Chopra, often write of the need for some form of belief in a "higher power," or "guiding force" that gives life meaning. Most often, this view is expressed in terms of "ultimate" meaning or purpose, not in the temporal sense of meanings that are most important here and now, but in the *teleological* sense that there must be either a deity or some kind of universal guiding force that has a grand plan for the universe and guides all of life toward some ultimate, preconceived end. As pastor Rick Warren put it: "The purpose of your life fits into a much larger, cosmic purpose that God has designed for eternity" (2002:21). Evan refuted that perspective in a calm, reassuring tone:

> I'm 81 now, and in all likelihood, maybe another 10, 15, best chance 20 years and I'm history. I don't think there *is* any *intrinsic, ultimate* meaning to life. I think we create our *own* meaning. I just think we're *one hundred* percent irrelevant as far as the universe is concerned. But as far as *each other* is concerned, we're not irrelevant. The world, for me, is meaningful because of meaningful, human relationships, not *divine* interventions. And

that's enough for me. It may not be enough for *some* people, but it is enough for me, and it gives my life plenty of meaning.

The participants in this study no longer believe that such a deity, force, power, or disembodied mind exists. And despite the claims of people like Warren, Moreland, and Vitz, they do not think that such a belief is necessary for a meaningful, worthwhile life.

After Leaving the Ministry

Although a few seemed "burnt out" on the ministry by the time they left, the majority expressed the sentiment that they still feel like ministers and that they still feel the same concern for deeper social connections and the desire to serve others:

> STEPHEN: My counselor tells me: "You know, you're still a preacher. You just changed the core of your beliefs. You're still the same person who wants to help people."

Some even consider what they are doing now as a kind of continuation of their ministry. Most transitioned to careers with similar characteristics to what they had been trained to do as ministers. Evan left the ministry at age 32 and earned a PhD in clinical psychology. Daniel had originally planned on entering the graduate program in family therapy at his seminary until it lost its accreditation by switching to a strictly "Bible-based" curriculum. He chose to attend a public university, earned an MA in marriage and family therapy, and currently works as an independent therapist. Robert now works for a community development organization that performs service work in Central America. And James, after receiving his M.Div. in counseling psychology from his seminary, went on to earn a PhD in genetics at a public university and now works in the health, nutrition, and fitness industry as an epigeneticist and sports psychologist.

While Kenneth said that he and another ex-pastor "sometimes joke about being 'secular ministers,'" a few actually did go on to create new "ministries" in one form or another. After leaving Christianity, for example, Aaron still felt the passion and concern that drove him when he was a minister. For roughly 30 years, his ministry had been focused on the cultivation of community in inner-city ghettos. He now channels that passion in another direction by volunteering as the humanist chaplain at a university. He feels that the need for this kind of community is only going to increase as more people leave religion:

> I think that over the next 25 years, fewer and fewer people are going to be able to believe in supernatural narratives. And that casts most of those people out into the world where they will have no community, where they will feel disconnected. And so, the question that consumes me the most is: How do I inspire, train, bring together people, to show them how to build communities that transform people's lives by creating an atmosphere in which loving relationships, and a sense of wonder, and an excitement about making the most of your life is supported and encouraged.

They all felt the absence in their lives of the kind of community that religious institutions provide. Many said that the community and fellowship was one of the few things they missed from their past vocations, and that they recognized the need for such community among nonbelievers.

Impediments to Communicating Identity

When claiming social identity labels for ourselves, we attempt to choose words that we think will successfully communicate something important about *who we are*—something that we feel must be communicated if our identity is to be more fully apprehended by others. When the participants in this study were ministers, they had a

simple, concise identity label that activated a cognitive frame with a vast range of identity characteristics. The CHRISTIAN MINISTER frame instantly established a baseline for what kind of person they were—their basic worldviews, values, concerns, and so forth—and unmistakably indicated that their values and concerns were *not superficial*. After abandoning that identity, the participants of this study encountered difficulties as they struggled to construct a new identity. Aaron, for example, said, "I struggled a great deal with what to call myself when I first was done with Christianity." James expressed the same frustration quite colorfully:

> I'm trying not to identify with *labels*. And it's just, what the fuck do you call yourself? [In a mocking tone:] "I'm a freethinker"? You know, that sounds like you farted on accident. [Laughter.] Or, "I'm a *Bright*"? You know? That sounds like you're a *Smurf!* It's like: *What are you*?

Efforts to construct new identities are greatly hampered by vagueness and ambiguity on many levels. In this section I will attempt to identify and explain the most salient impeding factors that emerged from this data as the participants dealt with the question: "What do I call myself now?"

Sense and Frame Disparity

The fact that a word has multiple senses—known in linguistics as "polysemy"—is not, in and of itself, particularly noteworthy. Most words have multiple senses, and religious terms are not unique in that respect. Ordinarily, polysemy involves a word with multiple meanings that are *related* within a more or less homogeneous semantic field. The different senses of "secular," for example, all refer to some aspect of that which is *not religion* (nonbelief, mundane objects, social institutions, politics, etc.). The indended

sense of a word is normally clear from the context in which a word is used, and we have no need to begin a conversation explicitly defining our terms. But that is not always the case. By "sense disparity" I mean a state in which two (or more) sides in a discourse are using *significantly different meanings* for the most pivotal words and phrases within the context of that discourse, resulting in severe and persistent miscommunication. The two thus continue to "talk past" one another, either because they do not realize or choose to ignore the fact that they are referring to different things with the same words.

I have already discussed the distinction between the figurative and supernatural meanings of religious/spiritual words. We may casually think of these as related "senses," but they are actually substantially different meanings. To speak of supernatural beings or forces intervening in your life is completely different from describing a feeling of inner peace or a personally transformative experience. This disparity regularly impedes the identity work of nonbelievers. When asked how they would respond if someone asked them "Are you religious?" or "Are you spiritual?," many said that it would depend on what sense the questioner had in mind:

> AARON: I would say, it depends on what you mean by "religious." If you mean, "Am I consumed with answering life's ultimate questions?", then I would go like, "Absolutely I'm religious." And if somebody asked, "Are you *spiritual*?", I would say, "Oh, it depends on what you mean by spiritual." Because I'm definitely cultivating what I would call a "secular spirituality," but there's not a supernatural bone in my body.

> THOMAS: I would have to ask them what they meant by that. If you're talking about *values*, and the interconnectedness between people, sure. But if you're talking about any reality outside the space-time universe, you know, what science can show, then no.

In other words, if the person asking the question is using "religious" or "spiritual" in a strictly figurative sense ("life's ultimate questions," "values," "interconnectedness"), then they might be willing to accept those identity labels, at least in that context. But if those

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words are being used in the supernatural sense ("a reality outside the space-time universe"), then they reject them. (In a later section I will raise the question of whether it is possible to avoid the supernatural sense when identifying as religious or spiritual.)

The extreme ambiguity of the word "spiritual" has become somewhat notorious among social scientists, who often lament the ongoing need to "unfuzzy the fuzzy" boundaries of the ill-defined category (Zinnbauer et al. 1997). Most of the participants in this study were reluctant to use the label for that very reason—they feared that it would cause confusion, because others would most likely have different understandings of the word than they now do. Bethany and Robert, for example, knew their answers immediately when asked how they respond to the question, "Are you a spiritual person?":

> BETHANY: *No*. No. I don't believe in a "spirit," so how can I believe in "spirituality"? I vacillate, but mostly I land on the side of, I think we need to retire that word, because I think it's just too confusing.

> ROBERT: I would not identify myself as a "spiritual person." I think it's too confusing. So if I say I'm a spiritual person, people make all kinds of assumptions based on *their* perception of that word. I guess for me, when someone asks what you are, they're wanting *clarity*, not *ambiguity*. And I think "spiritual" is *pretty* ambiguous.

Disagreements over the definition and use of the "atheist" identity label provide an example of how disparate identity and characterization frames can develop out of sense disparity. Nonbelievers often argue about the "true" meanings of identity labels such as "atheist," "agnostic," and "humanist," and vigorously debate whether to accept or reject them. Evan expressed a common sense disparity for the "atheist" label, one that is argued incessantly in comment threads and discussion forums throughout the Internet:

> "Atheist" . . . means somebody who *has no belief* in a supernatural being. Sometimes people think that atheists are people who claim, "I know for *certain* that there *is no* supernatural being." And of course, the reality is, you can't prove a negative. So, atheist

does *not* mean somebody who is 100 percent certain. It's just somebody who has no belief in a supernatural being.

It may seem like an inconsequential semantic distinction, but it is a persistent point of contention between nonbelievers who call themselves "atheists" and nonbelievers who have disdain for that label (and sometimes for the people who use it). Disparate senses of a word, of course, activate different cognitive frames, leading to *frame disparity*.

By "frame disparity" I mean a state in which a communicator understands a word or phrase with one cognitive frame, but that same word or phrase activates a *substantially different* cognitive frame in the receiver. In the present example, the resulting disparate frames can be determining factors in the decision to accept or reject the various identity labels available to nonbelievers. With the first sense of the "atheist" label, for example, Evan is describing the common ABSENCE OF BELIEF identity frame for atheism—a frame held by many who decide to claim the "atheist" label. The second sense activates a common negative characterization frame which we might call the ARROGANT DOGMATIC ATHEIST frame. This frame is often used by theists to characterize atheists as arrogant know-it-alls who claim to know something they cannot know with absolute certainty. In fact, that very characterization frame was one reason Aaron gave for his complete rejection of the label:

> I've *never* used the label of atheist, and never would. . . . I think for a lot of people what atheist means is, "I'm absolutely sure there is no God." And, you can't prove a negative. And so, just on a purely intellectual basis, the best I could be would be "agnostic."

Those two quotes illustrate a common issue for nonbelievers who are trying to decide how to identify after abandoning religious belief. Both Aaron and Evan are *nonbelievers* (neither believes that a deity exists) and *ontological naturalists* (neither

believes that anything supernatural exists). Evidently, they both agree that "you can't prove a negative." They even both identify with the "humanist" label. Yet one identifies with the "atheist" label (with the ABSENCE OF BELIEF identity frame) while the other rejects that identity label. Aaron rejects the "atheist" label not necessarily because he himself still holds the ARROGANT DOGMATIC ATHEIST characterization frame, but because he is all too aware of the presence of that characterization frame in others, and chooses to avoid that identity label in order to avoid being mischaracterized—that is, to avoid what I will refer to as an "identity misfire."

In the previous example, frame disparity was caused by disparate definitional senses. Frame disparity can also result when individuals have internalized significantly different cognitive frames early on in life, through socialization in different subcultures or from different life experiences. For example, when James was asked how he viewed atheists when he was still a Christian, a stereotyping frame instantly activated for him:

> *Gothic!* [Laughter] You know? In a small town, if you were an atheist it was because you were just *mad*. You know. "There are really *no* atheists." That's what you believed in a small town. . . . There's just people who are upset about the church and about God.

Call it the REBELLIOUS ATHEIST frame. James explained how he had believed that no one ever *really* disbelieves in the existence of God. In his understanding at the time, people who claimed to not believe were really just rebelling against God. In his small town, the "Goth" kids evidently became the prototype for that characterization frame. The REBELLIOUS ATHEIST frame was most likely *not* the identity that the Goth kids in his hometown has intended to communicate.

Sense Conflation and Conflated Frames

By "sense conflation" I mean a state in which a word or phrase with significant sense disparity is regularly used without any indication, from speaker or context, of which sense is intended, leaving the meaning in a state of unresolved ambiguity. When the word is used in this state, the multiple senses activate their respective cognitive frames simultaneously, thus creating a *conflated frame* in the mind of the receiver. By "conflated frame" I mean a cognitive frame comprised of two or more disparate frames fused into one, so that the sub-frames are always activated together, and one sub-frame is difficult to conceive of without the other. Religious terms are prime examples of sense conflation and conflated frames. The figurative and supernatural sense is almost always left unspecified, the intended sense is rarely obvious from the context, and more often than not, both senses are intended or assumed. The word or phrase thus remains in an unacknowledged ambiguous state, everyone involved in the communication left to their own interpretations.

Throughout her many years as a minister, Cheryl has talked and written about spirituality, and sometimes refers to herself as spiritual. For some time now, however, she has been conflicted about its use. At various times throughout the interview, she said she *does* use the term, and at other times she said she does *not* use it. Finally, she said that she is starting to avoid the word:

> Because I have come to find the idea of spirituality intertwined with the concept of a supernatural being or power, it's now a troublesome word for me. I don't believe in anything that resides or exists in a realm "beyond" the natural world.

Why would its association with the concept of a supernatural being or power make it a "troublesome word" for her? The "intertwining" she refers to is sense conflation of the

figurative and supernatural senses. It is troublesome because when she uses the word, she intends for it to be understood only figuratively, but the sense conflation prevents that by activating a *conflated* SPIRITUALITY frame, and it would take constant vigilance to keep only the FIGURATIVE SPIRITUALITY sub-frame activated without the SUPERNATURAL SPIRITUALITY sub-frame creeping into one's thoughts.

If we identify with the "spiritual" label, we cannot control whether or not the SUPERNATURAL SPIRITUALITY frame will be activated along with the FIGURATIVE SPIRITUALITY frame. That seems to be the sticking point for many nonbelievers who might otherwise accept the label. When the phrase "I'm spiritual" is spoken with no qualification, a *conflated frame* is activated: a conflated SPIRITUAL frame comprised of both the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL and the SUPERNATURALLY SPIRITUAL frames, fused into one. As Fillmore (1976) and Lakoff explained, a cognitive frame is an entire package of beliefs, images, impressions, and other frames, *all activated together as a single unit*. Thus, when the conflated SPIRITUAL frame is activated, both sub-frames are inevitably activated as one, so that the person automatically understands the word in both figurative terms and supernatural terms simultaneously. As we will see below, other religious terms suffer from this same sense conflation, and the continuous use of those words without qualification has resulted in conflated frames that are difficult or impossible to separate.

Identity Misfire

By "identity misfire" I mean the result of a frame disparity between the communicator's identity frame and the receiver's characterization frame, which leaves the receiver with a significant misapprehension of the communicator's identity. An

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identity misfire occurs when an identity label activates characterization frames in others which differ is a significant way from the identity frame the label was intending to communicate. An identity misfire can be either *detrimental* or *benign*. The former could potentially result in a tainted or stigmatized identity. The latter could have no effect at all, or it could lead to an embarrassing, humorous, or even reputable identity, but an *erroneous* identity nonetheless.

I asked all participants if there was anyone with whom they would *not* use the "atheist" identity label. Bethany was one of the few who said no:

> [Without hesitation] No. I mean, I've used that term to define myself in media and at conferences. And I think it's an important term to use, especially in light of the legislation in Ontario, that atheism is considered a "creed."

Bethany lives in Canada where (as others from Canada confirmed) she says she never feels any social stigma for identifying as an atheist:

> I'm an atheist. It's just not an issue. Most Canadians won't say to you, "Oh, you're a heartless, horrible devil that is set on the destruction of the universe." Most Canadians won't say that. My *mother* will. But nobody else I know would [laughter].

In her social context, using the "atheist" identity label does not activate negative characterization frames in others, and so does not result in an identity misfire. On the whole, for those who had been theologically liberal, identity misfire was minimal, with little to no consequences. For those who had been theologically conservative, however, the identity misfire was often extreme, and the consequences severe. Loss of friends, loss of job, divorce, bitter confrontations with family, and estrangement from children were not uncommon.

After Evan had left the ministry and started graduate school, his wife thought that his lack of enthusiasm for religious observance was just a phase. Eventually she came to realize that he was not going back:

> After I had finished my degree and was teaching, and she realized that not only was I *not* going to church then, but that I wasn't *ever* going to go back to church, that just, tragically, ended the marriage. She said she couldn't put up with that.

His parents died just prior to 2000, having convinced themselves that he was "*really* still a Christian," but that he "just didn't still use the language." His siblings, however, were another matter:

> I have a brother and sister who are still devoted Baptists, and they have decided to break off all contact with me once my book came out.

That was over six years ago, and he has had no contact with them since. Note that Evan had stopped believing and left the ministry almost 50 years ago, so his siblings had known that he was a nonbeliever for almost 45 years, but had not cut off all contact with him until he published a book about his nonbelief. Evan did not elaborate any further on that relationship. I can only hypothesize that proclaiming his nonbelief in such a public way must have amplified the stigma of it, and that was simply too much for them.

Identity misfire is not limited to discredited, tainted, or stigmatized identities; it can occur for those who communicate an identity frame that is normative or reputable. If someone says, "I'm a Christian," for example, that label may very well activate something like the intended GOOD CHRISTIAN frame for most people (possibly evoking images of food pantries, children's homes, a *Father Knows Best* family life, and the like), but for some people it may activate the SELF-RIGHTEOUS BIGOT frame (perhaps evoking images from the 1960s of white Christians shouting and kicking black people attempting

to sit at a public diner). Fifty years ago, the CATHOLIC PRIEST frame in most people's minds did not evoke the PEDOPHILE frame along with it. Today it often does. For most people, the CHRISTIAN PASTOR frame would evoke an image of a benevolent, selfless man caring for the needs of his "flock," but for others it might evoke images of televangelists and faith healers getting rich off gullible people willing to send huge sums of money (which could be considered instances of the more general SNAKE-OIL SALESMAN frame).

The resulting misidentification can differ from one person to the next, depending on the connotations each person associates with the identity label. The communicator may use a label that is usually normative or reputable and be unaware that the label activates inaccurate characterization frames in the receiver. Consider someone who identifies as a "spiritual person." At a minimum, their SPIRITUAL PERSON identity frame would contain some subset of the characteristics from the figurative sense of the word. They may hold the QUEST FOR MEANING frame, for example, or the SELF-ACTUALIZATION frame. When they communicate that identity, they might intend for the receiver to think of them as a conscientious person who cares about the welfare of others, who always strives to be a better person, and who is deeply concerned with the things that matter most in life. If, however, this person had said, "I'm a spiritual person," to Paul or James in the early days of their ministry careers, that phrase would have activated the DEMONIC SPIRITUALITY characterization frame:

> PAUL: "Spiritual," when I was going through seminary and so on, to me it had negative connotations, because in the Pentecostal church "spiritual" (or "mysticism," or "contemplation," things like that) was a very negative thing—even *demonic*.

> JAMES: Our spirituality was that we had a relationship with the only one, true God, and there's nothing outside of that. And if you found yourself being spiritual outside of God, then that was *evil*. That's not spirituality, that's *demonic. . . . Anything* outside of

Christianity. If you believed that you were spiritual in *any* form, . . . you *believed* it was true because you were being *manipulated* by demons.

Hence, in their relationships with Paul or James, identifying as a "spiritual person" would result in a stigmatized identity—a *detrimental* identity misfire.

If, on the other hand, this hypothetical person had said to Cheryl, "I'm a spiritual person," a very different characterization frame would be activated in Cheryl's mind:

When I engage with people who *identify* as "spiritual people," I often want to *gag*, because they're engaged in these self-centered, self-fulfillment practices which are all about them having some kind of "spiritual high." Right? They're *not* about engaging people. So this myopic self-fulfillment stuff, which "spiritual practices" often are, I [find] little meaning in that.

For Cheryl, the phrase "spiritual person" activates the SELF-ABSORBED SPIRITUAL SEEKER frame—a frame examined in detail by Edwin Schur in his 1976 study of the Human Potential Movement, which he characterized as "a clear invitation to self-absorption" (1976:4). Hence, in their relationship with Cheryl, their identity would certainly be far from what they intended to communicate, but would not be considered "stigmatized"— perhaps merely discrediting. In both cases, the identity frame that the person had intended to communicate with the "spiritual person" label missed its mark entirely, activated an undesirable characterization frame, and resulted in an erroneous understanding of the person's identity. The first resulted in a stigmatized identity, the second resulted in what I will call a "foiled identity."

Foiled Identity

When an identity misfire is *benign*, I am using the term "foiled identity" in contradistinction to Goffman's "spoiled identity"—another term he coined for a

stigmatized identity. A foiled identity is not tainted or stigmatized, but it is fundamentally

erroneous. The foiled identity may be considered *inconsequential*, and thus be of no

concern, or it may be considered *objectionable* (and thus *undesirable*) to the person

whose identity has been foiled. Cheryl, for example, had frequent experiences of the kind

so often described by mystics—a dissolving in the mind of the boundary between where

you end and everything that is *not you* begins. When she told a colleague about these

experiences, he put an identity label on her that she considered objectionable:

> Marcus and I did a week-long conference together, . . . and I shared [my experiences], and
> he said, "Oh, you're a *mystic*." . . . He *labeled* me as a "mystic" at that conference. Which
> *really bothered* me. . . . And I'm like, *don't* give me that *label*. I don't want that label. . . .
> Because to me, that's like a hierarchy of special super-spiritual people. Right? I have an
> experience that is very similar to an experience he has had. . . . But *his* was an experience
> of "God." *Mine* was something happening in my fucking *brain*. Right? Like, it was *not*
> an experience of God. I never even *thought* of it as an experience of God, even when I
> was an adolescent.

Being labeled a "mystic" would not have been discrediting or stigmatizing in the context

of a religion and spirituality conference. On the contrary, to the religious audience she

was speaking to, identifying as a mystic would have been highly reputable. Nonetheless,

Cheryl was angry that her colleague had imposed that identity upon her against her will.

Aside from Aaron and Paul, all other participants said that they generally avoid

identifying as either religious or spiritual. Robert explained his uneasiness with the

"spiritual" label:

> I'm nervous about using "spiritual" because it often still implies the supernatural. *Most* of
> the time, when I really dig into what somebody means by spiritual, what it *really* means
> is: "I still believe all these religious things, I just don't like the church very much"—
> people whose *core* beliefs may not have shifted very much, but who for whatever reasons
> are fed up with the institutional church, or institutional religion.

The type of people he is referring to are those who now typically identify as "spiritual but not religious." Considering that most of the participants in this study often do and say things that would be considered spiritual in the figurative sense, the "spiritual but not religious" identity would seem like a natural fit. Not one of the participants, however, claims that identity. Robert chooses to reject it because he does not want others to assume that he "still believes all those religious things" (i.e., *supernatural* things). Kenneth has a problem with it because, as a category, he thinks that it is too broad, and he does not want to be "lumped" into the same category with believers:

> When large polling groups, like PRRI or Pew, try to do studies to identify where people are on the belief spectrum, when they use terms like "spiritual but not religious," you know, if you define that as people who are interested in ultimate questions, now you've got a *huge* lump of people being thrown in to the same group as *other* people who are *theists*, but just don't like church. And that's a *problem*. You know? We need more precise metrics than that.

If Robert Fuller's figurative definition was the only one with which the word "spiritual" was understood—that is, if the only meaning of that word was, essentially, *the opposite of superficial*—the participants of this study could easily identify with it. I asked Kenneth if he could identify as spiritual using Fuller's definition:

> Um, I would *provisionally* agree with him. And what I mean by that is that, *if* what he means is that I'm interested in those ultimate questions, then I agree with him. I think my only hang up is that that word is used in such specific ways where *I'm* from, that I would want to make sure the word's not miscommunicating.

Why be concerned with such a seemingly inconsequential miscommunication of identity, especially when identifying as spiritual but not religious would allow them to avoid the stigma of their nonbelief? They could easily use the words "God" and "spiritual" in the figurative sense, and not worry about the fact that the receiver might assume the

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supernatural sense as well. None of the participants considered that option acceptable, because none of them wanted anyone to think that they still believe in anything supernatural. Avoiding the foiled identity of "supernaturalist" is important enough to them that they are willing to risk the tainted or stigmatized identity of a nonbeliever rather than be identified as something they are not, no matter how reputable:

> WILLIAM: I would not identify as being spiritual, just because of the connotations that that word has. Spiritual in the sense of believing in some kind of "spiritual reality" apart from the natural reality—"life after death," having a "soul" that lives on after the death of the body, stuff like that.

> KENNETH: For many people where *I* am, they believe that "spirit" refers to a second layer of reality—like, you know, an additional layer of metaphysical existence that coincides with the physical. And I don't believe that that is a real thing. So my one hang up about the word "spiritual" is that I don't actually think that "spirits" are real things, and so I get a *little bit* uncomfortable with the word for that reason.

Although all the participants share most of the characteristics associated with the FIGURATIVE SPIRITUALITY frame, they do not wish to be affiliated with any of the worldviews that the SUPERNATURAL SPIRITUALITY frame implies. In other words, they want to avoid an identity misfire that would lead to a foiled identity. Confusion is difficult to avoid when the word "spiritual" is rarely, if ever, qualified to indicate whether the figurative or supernatural sense is intended. And the situation seems to be no better in scholarly discourse than in common parlance. Instead, even in the scientific study of religion, the word is almost always used without clearly indicating which sense is intended, the two senses are thus *conflated* in the single word so that it activates *both* cognitive frames.

Forms of Oppositional Identity Work

I turn now to combining the gestalt theoretical framework woven together in Chapter III with the theoretical concepts explicated above, and applying them to the analysis of oppressive and oppositional identity work. It must be said at the outset, however, that when discussing "oppressive identity work" I do not mean to imply that all (nor even most) Christians consciously or actively engage in oppressive identity work against nonbelievers. Nor am I implying that all or most Christians overtly agree with the negative characterization frames. As we saw in a previous section, several of the participants in this study had not internalized those frames, because they had friends in their past who identified as atheists or nonbelievers.

As Entman explained, however, frames can be located in the *culture* as well as individuals, and Christians can be the *receivers* of those frames through many channels—books, magazines, radio, television, movies, church pulpits, and of course Internet websites and podcasts. These negative cultural characterization frames against nonbelievers are generated not only by extremists such as Pat Robertson, Ray Comfort, and Dinesh D'Souza, but also by ministers from the pulpits, by journalists such as Cal Thomas and Ross Douthat, and by professional scholars and public intellectuals such as J. P. Moreland, William Lane Craig, and Paul Johnson. The proliferation of such frames produced from the backlash against the New Atheists alone would make an interesting study in and of itself.

If an individual's stigmatized attribute is not readily apparent, he or she must deal with how to manage the public information about that attribute. Societies such as the United States are saturated with these negative characterization frames of nonbelievers.

In such societies, all nonbelievers—regardless of which self-identity labels they choose to accept or reject privately—must decide whether or not to make their nonbelief publicly known. As Goffman put it: "To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where" (1963:42). The easiest way to avoid the consequences of a stigmatized identity is, of course, to avoid the identity altogether through *concealment*—i.e., to stay "in the closet." Kelly Church-Hearl differentiated between two types of concealment as strategies of private oppositional identity work: avoiding *all* labels (2008:54) or just staying silent/closeted (2008:57) with regard to the labels that reveal their nonbelief. All of her participants "indicated that they are, to some degree, 'in the closet' when it comes to their personal beliefs about spirituality" (2008:57) and that those two strategies allow them to pass as Christian—or at least as participating in the American "civil religion."

When operating in this way, completely within the *private* sphere, concealment can be considered the most basic form of oppositional identity work. A nonbeliever can go his or her entire life without ever publicly discussing the topic of belief in the existence of God or the supernatural. Just how many nonbelievers choose "not to let on" is, for obvious reasons, extremely difficult, if not impossible, to measure. Nonbelievers who choose concealment, however, are not my concern in the present study. All the participants of this study are "out of the closet" as nonbelievers, and so are all engaged in one or many types of oppositional identity work *in the public sphere*. Oppressive identity work is directed, either deliberately or unconsciously, toward engendering a foiled identity at best, or a fully stigmatized identity at worst. Oppositional identity work is deliberately directed toward alleviating foiled, tainted, and/or stigmatized identity.

Below, I identify and examine four types of oppositional identity work that emerged from my interview data.

Avoidance Identity Work

Avoiding tainted or stigmatized *labels* is a simple and straight forward strategy for dealing with the negative characterization frames wrought by cultural oppressive identity work. The modus operandi of *avoidance identity work* is simply to avoid those specific identity labels that are most likely to activate negative characterization frames in others, resulting in an identity misfire. Most participants in this study are open about their nonbelief, but avoid the "atheist" label when possible, and do not generally consider it their primary identity. Instead, they typically use labels such as "freethinker," "secularist," "agnostic," or "humanist." While they prefer *not* to identify themselves as atheists in public, most said they would answer "yes" if someone asked them directly. The following statements are typical of their ambivalence toward, and general avoidance of, the "atheist" label:

> KENNETH: I mean, I'm willing to embrace the *word* atheist, because it *is* a correct statement: I *do*, in fact, not believe in any gods. It's just that it's such a limited term. I would only embrace it if there's only one single point I'm trying to make.

> LUKE: Well, I'm reluctant to use the word at all. I *do* describe myself as an "atheist" even though I have difficulties with that. . . . If someone says, "Are you an atheist?" I'll say, "Yeah, I am." But I'm hesitant to even describe myself as an atheist publicly *because* of the negative connotations, the arbitrariness of it. There's something about the word I don't like.

Only one participant completely rejects the "atheist" label. Aaron, who had emphasized that "there's not a *supernatural* bone in my body," when asked if he

considers himself an atheist now, answered without hesitation: "I've *never* used the label of atheist, and never would." Asked to clarify his reluctance, his response revealed a common dilemma ex-Christians face when attempting to construct a new identity:

> I struggled a great deal with what to call myself when I first was done with Christianity. Because "atheist," to many people simply means "anti-theist." It means that you actively are trying to undermine other people's faith and the idea of faith. And, I'm absolutely not trying to do that. Like, if people are happily believing in God, I'm happy to let them do that. And so, I'm not an anti-theist.

Like all nonbelievers, when deliberating upon which identity labels to apply to himself, Aaron had to take into consideration any possible negative characterization frames associated with the "atheist" label—in this case the ANTI-RELIGION ATHEIST frame—and decide whether or not he can accept being saddled with those characterizations.

Considering that Aaron now volunteers as a humanist chaplain at a university, his reluctance is understandable. Avoiding the negative characterization frames associated with the "atheist" label is particularly important for him as he tries to build community for nonbelievers at the university. In such a position, he must be approachable. Anything that would put up barriers between him and the people who need that community would work against his efforts. If people at his university constantly referred to him as "the *atheist* chaplain," young students coming into the university with strong negative characterization frames about atheists could easily be put off by the label. The "humanist" label does not activate nearly as many negative characterization frames as "atheist," so he chooses to use it as his primary identity.

Aaron's rejection of the "atheist" label is not an attempt at complete concealment of his nonbelief. He is, in fact, very open about the fact that he no longer believes in anything supernatural, and he discusses it regularly in his humanist campus ministry and

on a podcast he produces. So he is not avoiding the general stigma of nonbelief. Rather, he knows that the "atheist" label will activate the worst of the negative characterization frames in many people, so he chooses to not use that label at all in an attempt to avoid the identity misfire that would lead to a stigmatized identity.

Dissonant Identity Work

Some individuals approach oppositional identity work from the other direction; they not only *accept* the tainted identity labels, they openly express them in a deliberate attempt to lessen their stigmatizing power. I will refer to this form of oppositional identity work as *dissonant identity work*. The modus operandi of dissonant identity work is *to induce cognitive dissonance* within the oppressive characterization framework by placing into public view individuals whose characteristics *starkly contradict* the negative characterization frames associated with the tainted identity. The concept of cognitive dissonance refers to the unpleasant state of mental tension that occurs when a new "cognition" (belief, image, attitude, judgement, etc.) contradicts a cognition already well-established in a person's mind. When such a state arises, he or she is compelled to find a way to relieve that tension (Cooper 2007; Aronson 2008). As we saw in Chapter III, beliefs, images, attitudes, and judgements are the constituents of cognitive frames. So to describe cognitive dissonance in terms of framing: cognitive dissonance occurs because the human mind rebels against the presence of contradictory cognitive frames. Those contradictory examples force those within the oppressive framework to become cognizant of the gaping frame disparity between their characterization frames and the identity frames of those who openly identify with those labels.

In a culture saturated with supernaturalist cognitive frames, anyone publicly communicating nonbelief in the supernatural is engaged in dissonant identity work to some extent. All the participants of this study, for example, came out of the closet as nonbelievers (if not "atheists"), not only to their friends and families, but in the public sphere, through blogs, podcasts, letters to the editor, and through newspaper, magazine, radio, and television interviews. Many even published books detailing their deconversion stories. By doing so, they challenged the established characterization frames about nonbelievers, exposing those frames as erroneous by offering themselves as living counter-examples, despite the backlash from those who would defend the challenged characterization frames.

Cheryl had been leading a congregation for over 15 years. The members of her church were well aware of her naturalistic worldview, and she says that the vast majority shared in that view. Nor did she hide her views from her colleagues, many of whom, she says, are naturalists as well. Since she was ordained in 1993, no one in the leadership or higher courts of the denomination concerned themselves with what she or her congregation believed—until, that is, Cheryl decided to call herself an "atheist." As it turns out, living in Canada confers no guaranteed immunity against a tainted identity:

> It was in 2013. We were doing an "Interview an Atheist at Church Day," and we had the executive director of the Clergy Project coming, and she was going to be interviewed by *me*. And then the situation in Bangladesh became world news. One author had been murdered and four bloggers were subsequently arrested. And at the same time there was a pianist in Turkey that had been sentenced to 10 months in prison for being an atheist. So, I went to my board and talked to them about *also* being interviewed *as an atheist*, and taking that label on. Because *clearly* I *was* one, and I'd been called that publicly. But I had never identified *myself* as an atheist.

On February 15, 2013, a secular blogger named Ahmed Rajib Haider was brutally

mutilated and murdered in front of his home in Dhaka, Bangladesh for insulting Islam

(Chalmers 2013). Then, in early April, 2013, four secular bloggers in Bangladesh were

arrested for "hurting religious sentiments" (Winston 2013). And on April 15, 2013,

international pianist and composer Fazil Say was given a 10-month suspended sentence

for blasphemy by a court in Istanbul (Arsu 2013). Cheryl had always had a very strong

sense of social justice, and cited that as one of the main reasons she became a minister.

These and other atrocities against nonbelievers stirred her to reflect upon why, after all

these years as a nonbeliever, she had avoided publicly identifying with the "atheist" label.

The question of what identity label best represented her position on theistic beliefs

had been a recurring dilemma, and her story provides a prime example of the felt need to

avoid the tainted label:

> When I wrote my first book I know I certainly didn't believe in a supernatural being with
> interventionist powers. I identified as a "nontheist" in that book. Then, subsequent to
> that, I realized that a number of my colleagues *also* identified as "nontheist," but they
> still had this sense of the supernatural. So, I didn't want to call myself a nontheist in my
> second book. I didn't actually identify as an atheist personally till probably right when
> my first book was published. Shortly after that was when I realized that the term
> "nontheist" was not working and that "atheist" would have to be the next term. But I
> didn't want to use that in my second book, so I identified as a "theological nonrealist"—
> which is all verbal calisthenics, right?

Asked why she had decided against "atheist" and invented a euphemism instead, she

simply acknowledged: "I think I anticipated exactly what's happened." Despite her social

status as the minister of a thriving congregation, despite all that she had done for her

community, and despite everything she had written and spoken, she knew that publicly

claiming the "atheist" label could (even in Canada) lead certain people to disregard all of

it and to question her worthiness as a minister.

Eventually, her sense of social justice, agitated by the events in Bangladesh and many others like it in other countries, was enough to overcome her hesitancy. As a deliberate act of oppositional identity work, she decided to publicly identify as an atheist:

> It was an *act*. I mean, my church *taught* me how to stand in solidarity with people. And so, when I *did* that, that's exactly what I was doing. There are a lot of derogatory characteristics that are put onto the word "atheist." None of those bloggers identified as atheist. They identified as *secular*, and the word *atheist* was attached to them in order to incite hatred.

Her choice to adopt the "atheist" label is a paradigmatic case of oppositional identity work. As mentioned above, the atheist identity is mired by a great many negative characterization frames, which are reinforced through many cultural communication channels. Cheryl's story highlights the fact that oppositional identity work can either operate within the *private sphere*, staying in the closet as a personal defense mechanism against a stigmatized identity, or it can operate within the *public sphere* as a form of social justice for all who are affected by the stigmatized identity.

Although she had been open about the discredited and potentially tainted identity of general nonbelief, she had avoided the heavily stigmatized "atheist" identity simply by not using that label publicly. She knew, as a matter of definition, that she was an atheist, meaning only that she did not believe in the existence of a supernatural, personal deity (as she put it: "*clearly* I *was* one"). Up to that point she had engaged only in private oppositional identity work in relation to that particular identity, avoiding the label so that the oppressive identity work within the culture would not affect her. In this way she could safely stand outside of its path and avoid the gaze of those who—consciously or unconsciously—perpetuate that oppression.

By publicly identifying as an atheist, she chose to engage in oppositional identity work in the wider public sphere. Stepping into its path, she immediately felt the gaze of those who perpetuate the oppressive identity work against atheists. Many people were not happy about such a prominent minister identifying with such a tainted label. As she so nonchalantly put it: "So, yeah. My denomination was very upset." A few ministers within her denomination started speaking out against her. Others made attempts to instigate hearings in the higher courts of the church to determine whether her beliefs were "in essential agreement" with the denomination's official articles of faith.

Cheryl says that most of her colleagues hold a conception of God based on the more impersonal HIGHER POWER or SPIRITUAL FORCE frames, and that many others share her purely metaphorical view. Despite the fact that they too do not think of God as a personal, supernatural deity, many of them still held the negative characterization frames toward the "atheist" label itself, which they absorbed from their culture:

> When my church joined the *Oasis Network*, one of my colleagues sent an email out telling everyone that we had joined an organization "that is trying to kill church, and prevent conversation about God in the public realm." Well, that's complete *crap*. So I've been quite frustrated with my colleagues, who would *never* assume that *Muslim* meant *terrorist*, but they assume that *atheist* means *religion-hater*. And that's a problem. And they don't see that as an issue. They don't see the similarity there.

The identity frames exhibited by Cheryl profoundly conflicted with the characterization frames of her opponents. The ANGRY ATHEIST and ANTI-RELIGION ATHEIST frames lead them to believe that all atheists are "angry at God" and want to destroy religion, yet here was a prominent minister, obviously *not* against religion, identifying as an atheist. The WRETCHED SINNER frame evokes an image of atheists living miserable lives of moral depravity, yet here was a *minister* living a reasonably happy life and deeply engaged with

moral concerns. The LOST SOUL frame evokes an image of atheists aimlessly wandering through meaningless lives with no sense of value, purpose, or self-worth, yet here was a minister with a clear sense of meaning, value, and purpose.

Because the mind rebels against contradictory frames, it is compelled to find a way to relieve cognitive dissonance. In the situation at hand, one option would be to deny the opposing identity frames and reassert the negative characterization frames in an attempt to reinforce them. In Cheryl's case, that meant (1) accusations that she is *really* against religion (despite the fact that she remained the pastor of a congregation), and (2) judgements that she is no longer worthy of being a minister. Another option, however, would be to call into question the accuracy of those negative characterization frames, and to re-evaluate the stigmatized status of the tainted identity. Dissonant identity work aims for the latter.

This type of oppositional identity work is not uncommon. For example, in an attempt to counteract the negative characterizations of Mormons during Mitt Romney's 2012 presidential run, the LDS Church used dissonant identity work in their "I'm a Mormon" advertising campaign (Goodstein 2011). Similarly, Richard Dawkins' "OUT Campaign" (MacAskill 2007) and Todd Steifel's "Openly Secular" campaign (Dawkins & Blumner 2014) both attempted to counteract negative characterizations of nonbelievers—the former with the "atheist" label, the latter with the "secularist" label. Some evidence does point to the veracity of such efforts to raise awareness in the general public of the prevalence of nonbelievers. Using longitudinal data from the World Values Survey, Will Gervais found that in most societies, perceived "atheist prevalence was negatively related to anti-atheist prejudice" (2011:546). Through two of his own social psychological experiments, he then found that anti-atheist prejudice was reduced among

those with a higher perception of the prevalence of atheists in society (2011:549). Colin Koproske, too, found that "acceptance of [nonbelievers] will rely on Americans' exposure to atheists and their opinions" (2006:49).

It remains to be seen, however, whether the extreme stigma of the "atheist" label can ever be overcome. The higher courts of her denomination did eventually hold hearings, and for several months after our interview Cheryl was officially "on review" to determine whether she should be allowed to remain a member of its clergy. Subsequently, the Review Committee delivered their verdict that they consider her to be "unsuitable for ministry" in the United Church of Canada. She wrote the following after that final meeting with the Review Committee: "As a 'nontheist,' I was no threat. As a 'theological non-realist,' I was probably misunderstood. But as an 'atheist'? How could that be tolerated?" The identity labels we choose really do make a difference in the cognitive frames evoked by those labels in others.

Adaptive Identity Work

We saw above how the act of publicly communicating a stigmatized identity label can operate as a form of public sphere oppositional identity work by challenging the dominant characterization frames in an attempt to destigmatize the identity. Conversely, we saw that avoiding specific tainted labels can operate as a form of private sphere oppositional identity work, to safeguard an individual against the stigmatized identity. When someone who is already out as a nonbeliever wishes to avoid a stigmatized label such as "atheist," other identity labels must be found to counteract the generally tainted status of nonbelief. Aaron and Paul chose an option that we might call *adaptive identity*

work. Its modus operandi is to adapt the meanings of the dominant identity labels by attempting to modify the cognitive frames that they evoke. Some of the participants—primarily Aaron and Paul—are attempting to *reframe* the "religious" and "spiritual" identity frames by redefining them in such broad senses that they can apply to nonbelievers as well:

> AARON: Religion to me, and at my university, is not a particular set of beliefs. Religion is the pursuit of answers to life's ultimate questions. And so, I work at the Office of Religious Life, and I'm happy to be there. Because I'm trying to answer life's ultimate questions too. I simply answer those questions within the realm of the natural world.

> PAUL: For me, spiritual is a person's *inner life* that we nurture as we struggle to understand mystery, and ourselves, and one another.

This may seem like a copout, as if they are taking the easy way out by capitulating to the dominant culture's identity frames. In fact, one faction within the online atheist community roundly scorns nonbelievers who choose this option, derisively labeling them "accommodationists." Adaptive identity work, however, can be anything but easy.

Both dissonant and adaptive identity work operate by attempting to change conceptual frames within the dominant cultural framework. The dissonant identity work that Cheryl eventually took upon herself is an attempt to change the tainted *characterization frames* in the dominant culture. Conversely, adaptive identity work is an attempt to change the reputable *identity frames* of the dominant culture. Recall, however, that social scientists who research intractable conflict mediation (e.g., Campbell & Docherty 2004; Shmueli et al. 2006) have found that identity frames are *far* more difficult to change than characterization frames. It could be said, then, that although avoiding the stigmatized identity labels may make it easier to endure, adaptive identity work of this kind is far more difficult—if not impossible—to accomplish.

Those who attempt adaptive identity work encounter two interminable difficulties, both arising from the extreme frame disparity between the established cultural frames and the new frames they are trying to establish in their place. First, because the labels already have well-established meanings, the communicators must always qualify them by including a *caveat* of some sort to explain their alternative meanings and avoid misinterpretation and identity misfire:

> AARON: I don't like it that "religion" and "spirituality" get associated exclusively with supernaturalism. So, all of those things, you kind of have to throw the word "secular" in front of them, or else, at this stage in the game, you're gonna confuse people.

> BETHANY: I *do* use the word "transcendent," but I always give kind of a disclaimer when I use it. So it's always "like" transcendence. You know, that sort of thing.

> CHERYL: I use the word "sacred." It's one of the words I use regularly. But I *define* it every time I use it. So I say, "*by which I mean* something that is too important, or crucial, or central to our human experience for us to degrade it, or deny it, or risk losing it."

Whenever a nonbeliever is using religious/spiritual language, "the caveat" is sure to appear at some point, in an attempt to avoid a foiled identity. Second, despite the caveat, they *cannot* completely avoid misinterpretation and identity misfire. Within their own communities they may reach a point at which they no longer need to qualify and explain their meanings. But when they use such language outside the communities, frame disparity inevitably leads to identity misfire. Cheryl noted that the people in her congregation experience this problem when they use words like "sacred" with people outside the congregation:

> That's how I've nurtured the use of "sacred" in my congregation. But I don't know that they notice me giving them a definition every single time I use the word. So *they* might use that word *outside* of the congregation and have it misinterpreted. So if someone misunderstood them, and said, "But I didn't think you *believed* in things coming from God," they'd say, "But I *don't*. That's not what I *mean* by 'sacred.'"

Paul's story could almost serve as a stand-alone case study of the pitfalls encountered in adaptive identity work, caused by the discouraging confusion of these despairingly ambiguous labels. His answers to my questions reveal the kind of continuous inner conflict caused by the frame disparity of such primary identity labels as "religious" and "spiritual." Within a year after leaving Christianity, Paul noticed what Aaron had predicted: many of his readers, after leaving their religions, found themselves "cast out into the world," feeling disconnected, with no community. Before long, he found himself filling the role of a minister once again:

> I launched my website as a site where I could provide my resources to help people through spiritual transition. Instead, what happened was that a *community* started to form.

The sizeable readership of his blog had followed him through the years, as he chronicled his journey out of Christianity. Some had traveled that road with him, interacting through comment posts on his blog. Others, who had either already left or were in the midst of leaving Christianity, came to his site seeking support for their own journeys.

By 2012, Paul decided this community had outgrown his personal website and needed to stand on its own. He created a separate site that could more effectively facilitate community-building, and thus began his new "online congregation":

> My online community provides a safe place for people to achieve their own spiritual freedom and independence. I say it's about "spiritual independence" because I want people to find their own way of being spiritual, whether they're in the church or out. It's to be able to *choose*, and walk, and live out their own spiritual paths. There's over 200 members at this point. It's just online, so people from all over.

The members hold a wide variety of worldviews and identities. Some use the religious/ spiritual language, others prefer to avoid it. Some reject labels such as "atheist" or "secular," others embrace them. His role in this new ministry is more as a facilitator than

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a preacher. The community itself is based on the exploration of ideas and beliefs rather than adherence to doctrines, and Paul explores along with them rather than preaching to them, encouraging them to come to their own, independent conclusions. As he likes to describe it: "We all eat at the same table but we like different things." The few guidelines ("table etiquette") include the following: have respect for "the inherent worth and dignity of every person;" treat all members "with respect, compassion, equality, and dignity;" do not make assumptions about the beliefs or opinions of others—listen before you speak; and encourage all members in a "free and responsible search for truth and meaning."

Paul recognizes that each member of his community brings a different meaning to the table for words such as "religious" and "spiritual," and that the disparity in meaning can be a significant source of communication breakdown. Truth be told, he says, he prefers to not use those labels *at all*. Such extensive ambiguity, he admits, leaves him wondering what anyone really means when they describe themselves as "spiritual":

> "Spiritual," *now*, can mean anything from yoga to crystals to the Spaghetti Monster to you *name* it. When somebody says they're "spiritual," I have no idea what they *mean*. I have absolutely no idea. And the same when somebody says they're "religious." I don't know what they mean by that. Do they mean that they have a liturgical cycle in their life? Or do they meditate in front of a candle? There's just all kinds of baggage with it now. That's why I try not to use those words.

Several other participants expressed the same desire to avoid all identity labels, along with the reluctant acknowledgement that they cannot be avoided. Note that, although he says that he tries not to use these terms, he used the word "spiritual" four times in the description of his online community quoted above. Moreover, when asked if he would identify himself as "spiritual" to someone with a New Age worldview, he reluctantly said that he *would*, because he feels that he has no choice:

I wouldn't avoid the word. I *can't* avoid the word. That's my problem. I can't seem to avoid it. I use the word "spiritual" only because I can't think of a better one.

As we will see in the next section, the inability to think of a better word is a pervasive problem for nonbelievers.

Some of the other participants had chosen to identify with the "humanist" label, so I asked Paul if he ever uses that word, and what it means to him:

PAUL: "Humanist" for many people would just mean "secular." Although I appreciate the word, for *me* humanist implies the rejection of that *soul* side of life. If I were to say, "I'm a *humanist*," I'm afraid it would give the impression that I'm rejecting all notions of "soul," or "spirit," or that whole side of things.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And when you say "soul," do you mean it in the sense that there is an immaterial *thing* that *exists*, called a "soul," or . . .

PAUL: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: . . . or do you mean "soul" in a metaphorical sense?

PAUL: [pause] *Inner* life. For the *inner* life. A metaphor for the inner life. Yeah.

That exchange left me wondering: How does Paul actually conceptualize the word "soul"? What does his cognitive frame for that word consist of? Before I finished the question, he had agreed that "soul" referred to "an immaterial *thing* that *exists*." But after considering for a moment whether or not he meant it in a metaphorical sense, *he agreed with that also*, saying that he uses the word as a metaphor for a person's "inner life."

Paul regularly expressed disparate frames for words with which he struggled back and forth. It was a perfect example of the kinds of inner struggles anyone faces with deeply ambiguous words. He had the same problem with words like "spirit" and "spiritual":

I can think of one atheist friend now who struggles to understand himself better, interpreting his dreams using the Jungian kind of way of analyzing it, and wondering how he's connected with the rest of the world, and his dealing with the mystery of, say,

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death, and suffering, and evil in the world. That, for me, is a "*spiritual*" endeavor. *He* would not call it that, because "spiritual" for him just has too many negative connotations, and it *implies* "spirit."

Note the sense disparity present in Paul's dual use of the word "spirit." In the previous quote, he said that he was afraid the "humanist" label would imply that he is "rejecting all notions of 'soul,' or 'spirit,'" which would result in an identity misfire. In that context, he used the word "spirit" (synonymously with "soul") *in the figurative sense*, as a metaphor for "the inner life," and to refer precisely to those characteristics he described his atheist friend as having in the latter quote. His friend, however, rejects the "spiritual" label because it implies "spirit" *in the supernatural sense*.

If the above description of my conversation with Paul seems disjointed and confusing, that is no accident. It illustrates the effects of the extreme frame disparity of such vague, ill-defined, "fuzzy" words. Mentally juggling all those disparate frames leads not just to a fundamental breakdown in communication, but to a fundamental breakdown in cognition. That is one of the pitfalls that makes adaptive identity work so difficult— and perhaps impossible—to maintain. The identity frames of the dominant cultural group are not only venerable and vast, they are also *continuously supported and reinforced* by that dominant group. And if those in the marginalized group continue to use the same language, as Lakoff pointed out, those words will continue to evoke the dominant frames, *thus reinforcing them*. In that respect, adaptive identity work can actually work *against* its intended objective.

Historical evidence is not on the side of adaptive identity work. For over a century, a handful of philosophers and theologians have been promoting a philosophical position known as "religious naturalism" or "spiritual naturalism." In the modern West, the idea of

religion without the supernatural has enjoyed a rich history, with its roots in the panentheism of Baruch Spinoza and the pantheism of Giordano Bruno (Stone 2008:18). From John Dewey and George Santayana in the first half of the twentieth-century, to Ursula Goodenough and Loyal Rue at its end, those who identify as "religious naturalist" or "spiritual naturalist" have attempted to reframe religious/spiritual language so that it only includes the figurative sense. After all this time, however, the number of people who self-identify as "religious naturalists" or "spiritual naturalists" remains miniscule. The vast majority of nonbelievers, even those who are similar to the participants in this study, are reluctant to use that language. Aaron, for example, was the only participant in this study who even *mentioned* the phrase "religious naturalist," and that was only in passing as he was trying to think of alternative labels. He does not primarily go by that label. The identity simply has not gained ground among the population of nonbelievers.

Alternative Identity Work

Almost all the participants in this study prefer not to use labels such as "atheist" or "agnostic" as their *primary* identities, because those words only identify them by what they *do not* believe and say nothing about what they *do* believe. Yet they reject the "religious" and "spiritual" identity labels, and prefer not to use any of the language associated with religion and spirituality, because the supernatural connotations of those words would cause identity misfires and lead to foiled identities. How, then, do they construct new identity *that communicates nonsuperficiality* after leaving religion? Some engage in dissonant and/or adaptive oppositional identity work. And although both of

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those endeavors help, each in its own way, to fight the oppressive identity work from the dominant Christian culture, they do not contribute to the creation of new identity.

By refusing to identify with the labels of either the negative characterization frames or the positive identity frames from the dominant culture, most of the participants are taking an alternative path to oppositional identity work. The modus operandi of *alternative identity work* is to step outside of the current cultural framework by ignoring the currently ubiquitous identity and characterization frames, and attempting to invent and cultivate an alternative identity framework. Figuratively speaking, they are *refusing to play the game*. Consider the following two examples of how William and Cheryl are engaging in adaptive identity work.

William still felt a strong desire to be a minister after his deconversion, much like Aaron and Paul. Unlike them, however, William deliberately avoids religious and spiritual terminology. When asked if he considers himself "spiritual," he gave a weary, somewhat exasperated sigh:

> Not really. Only if we carefully define what we mean by "spiritual." And I would argue that an atheist can be "spiritual" in a *general* kind of way, like Sam Harris talks about. But in most cases I would not identify as being spiritual.

Once he came out of the closet, William became more involved with the community of nonbelievers in his city. Over time, he recognized something missing, a need he felt he could fill. He started a weekly meetup group for nonbelievers interested in study, self-reflection, and discussion of philosophical, scientific, and even religious topics. He calls it a "secular Sunday school for adults," and treats it as a sort of "secular ministry":

I *still* consider myself to be a minister. I just minister to a different group of people now, with a different worldview. Because the way I look at it, even atheists need ministry, in the sense of having community and people around them that care about them, and will look after their welfare. Because to me, that's what ministry is all about. It's the care and nurture of other people.

Contrary to Aaron's definition of religion, this group's rejection of the religious and spiritual identities does not equate with a rejection of "the pursuit of answers to life's ultimate questions." Although, the way William describes it, the members of his group are not so much "seeking answers" as they are *exploring the questions*.

The group meets for several hours every Sunday for breakfast at an Irish pub, while William facilitates discussions based on a chapter from a book they are studying at the time. Past selections include such titles as *Reason and Reverence: Religious Humanism for the 21st Century* by Unitarian minister William Murray, and *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* by Sam Harris (one of the original four "New Atheists"). Although those two books use the language of religion and spirituality—albeit, in a figurative sense—the group thoroughly enjoyed studying both, and even agreed with most of what the authors had written. Even so, William says, they constantly balked at words like "religious" and "spiritual," because the religious terminology implied too much of the supernatural. He said that most of them felt fairly comfortable with the word "reverent," because it carries far less supernatural connotations, and is commonly used outside of a religious or spiritual context. So, for example, if he was reading a quotation from the book in which the word "religious" or "spiritual" appeared, he would replace it with "reverent," and that made the author's words more palatable to everyone.

Cheryl has actually been engaging in extensive alternative identity work with her congregation for many years. For example, she stopped using the word "God" because it always carries supernatural connotations. She rewrote the prayers used by her congregation so that they do not reference a supernatural being. Although she is a paid minister of the church, she does not play the role of the *authority* that everyone must listen to and accept without question. Accordingly, her talks are no longer called "sermons," they are now called "perspectives." She explains:

> We call them "perspective[s]" (and there's a bracket around the "s" at the end). So the idea is that I'm merely sharing my perspective on something, and *you* have the responsibility to take it and add *your* perspective to it. Like you're *interpreting* it through your perspective. And then when you share it again, you're sharing it with your perspective added to it. So it's an *aggregate* by the time somebody talks about it someplace else.

Her "perspective[s]" no longer concentrate on "god talk," and are not always centered around the Bible. Instead, she and other speakers *focus on values*:

> There're three things that we focus on as regularly as possible. When we come together on Sunday, we are reminding ourselves that we are *grounded* in the interconnectedness of life, we're *guided* by love as a value, and we're there to *grow* in wisdom. So when I'm speaking, I am generally talking about something to do with our *relationships*—with ourselves, with others, and with the world.

She is in the process of gradually *reframing* the way her congregation speaks of all the various nonsuperficial practices at their church. This is not just a matter of changing the words they use. To make real change, she must change the underlying cognitive frames that constitute the meanings of those words.

Aaron's decision to reject the "atheist" label, and his desire to continue using the "religious" and "spiritual" labels, was based in part on the fact that the "atheist" label

only indicates what someone does *not* believe, and says nothing about what someone *does* believe:

> If I simply say "I'm an atheist," they go like, "Oh, I get it. You don't believe in God." And I'm like, yeah, yeah, but that's not my "*spiritual* identity." My *spiritual identity* is somebody who's convinced that this life is the only one that there is, and whose response to that is: "How do I make the most of it?", and whose conclusion is that the way to make the most of it is to commit yourself to love and justice and wonder.

This was a common opinion among the participants—even among those comfortable with identifying as atheists. Most agreed with Aaron that the label is insufficient, and many choose to identify with the "humanist" label for that very reason. They see "humanist" as a positive label that identifies them by the values they hold rather than just by what they do not believe:

> MELISSA: I find the terms like "atheist" and "agnostic" to be sorely lacking. Because it *really* just says what you believe about God, which I find to be very limiting and kind of useless. I prefer to be known more by how I engage with the world and the people around me. And so in *that* sense I would prefer to be known as a "humanist."

> STEPHEN: Atheism, to a large degree, has nothing to offer. It's just a *lack of belief*. That's why I'm also a *humanist*, because I think humanism is the way forward. It's humanism that gives me my ethical and moral framework by which I develop my worldview.

Many nonbelievers choose to identify as humanists. But does the humanist identity sufficiently signify the nonsuperficial side of life and cover the same range of meaning as the "spiritual" identity label? William seems to think that it does:

> INTERVIEWER: In the past, when you said, "I'm a minister," that identified the kinds of *values* that you held, your basic beliefs and worldview, and *so* much more. Is there one label that could do that now?

> WILLIAM: [without hesitation] That would be "humanist." Humanist carries the connotations of having a deep concern for relationships with others, and relationships with the world—you know, that type of thing. So to me, humanist takes the place of spiritual.

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Like other identity labels, however, "humanist" has the potential for identity misfire, because it has multiple senses that activate disparate cognitive frames. At the opposite end of the frame disparity continuum from William, we saw in a previous section how Paul thinks of "humanist" as communicating "a rejection of that *soul* side of life"—which is to say, a rejection of that *nonsuperficial* side of life. Thus, we have two frames for the "humanist" label that are polar opposites. Whereas William interprets "humanist" as a suitable substitute for "spiritual," Paul sees the "humanist" label as completely lacking the identity content he associates with the "spiritual" label.

The "humanist" identity label has also accumulated negative characterization frames in other cultural contexts. In his study of the spiritual but not religious identity, Robert Fuller delineated "three types of unchurched Americans": the "spiritual but not religious," the "religiously ambiguous," and the "religiously indifferent." The third type, he informs us, are "secular humanists," whom he characterizes as follows:

> About one in every seven Americans is *completely indifferent to religion*. We often call these people "secular humanists" because they reject supernatural understandings of the world and instead rely solely on reason and common sense. [emphasis added] (2001:2)

He further asserts that "secular interests and activities . . . lack any concern with a larger reality" (2001:8). Whereas William had said that he considers "humanist" a good substitute for "spiritual" in the figurative sense, Fuller—a professional religious studies scholar—dismisses the secular humanist identity out-of-hand by characterizing it with what we might call the COLD RATIONALIST frame: people who "rely solely on reason and common sense," and are seen as being "completely indifferent" to the kinds of values and emotional experiences commonly ascribed only to religion and spirituality. Recall that I quoted Fuller's definition of spirituality as a paradigm for the figurative sense of the term.

Fuller suggests that secular humanists, such as Bethany, do not even fit his figurative sense *because* they "reject supernatural understandings of the world."

Aaron, who now identifies as a humanist chaplain, originally had misgivings about the label because it activated another common characterization frame in his mind:

> Initially I wasn't really drawn to "humanist." I mean, we're just animals like all the rest of them. And so the idea that I'm a *humanist* would make it seem like I don't care about dogs, or about elephants. And I *do*. And, you know, there are other sentient creatures that grieve the deaths of their loved ones, or that have social contracts, and that share and that show compassion.

Those who have identified as humanists for many years are all too familiar with this characterization frame, because this way of characterizing humanism is common among its critics (e.g., Ehrenfeld 1978:5; Hitchcock 1982:61*ff*; Taylor 2007:299*ff*). With this frame—call it the ANTHROPOCENTRIC HUMANIST frame—humanists are portrayed as *deifying* human beings, or at least raising them to the status of the "highest good." Cheryl was quite familiar with this characterization, and spoke of it with derision (affecting a righteous tone in her voice to imitate the people who say it):

> I often call myself a humanist. *And*, then I have to *explain it*, because people say, "*Well, you know, I don't think humans are the be-all and end-all*." Because, you know, in that *early* understanding of 'humanist,' that's where they went. So I have to explain: "Yeah, well, it's a *broader* understanding at this point in time." So. Yeah.

Many of these ex-ministers do, in fact, identify as humanists now. The "humanist" label seems to be the main contender to replace my "nonsuperficial" placeholder as an alternative label for the *figurative senses* of religious and spiritual. But even those who identify with it recognize that it does not fully communicate their identity. To echo Jürgen Habermas (2010), they have an awareness of something missing:

EVAN: Those of us who have experienced a *de*conversion and no longer are believers—when at one point we were not only believers but very, very *committed* and *involved* believers—belonging to a religious group becomes an extended family. And to *replace* that is not an easy thing to do, even when you have secular groups that you belong to. Where I live there is a very strong humanist community. We have our own building, and two Sundays a month we have a meeting, where we will have various speakers, and then usually have a breakfast or lunch together. And that *somewhat* takes the place of it. But it's not quite the same thing, because the *emotional* component of being a member of a church, or of any strong religious denomination, is so important.

That "emotional component" that comes with a large community with tightly integrated cognitive frames of meaning was mentioned by others as well. Melissa expressed this same frustration:

I *miss* the community. I really do. I miss—I miss *singing*. Like, I miss *singing* about stuff that has *meaning* to me, and singing about more than just —— I'm in a choir, you know, but that's just *words*, that's *technique*, you know. . . . And *it* scratches an itch, to a point. But you know, it's not the same, because I'm not in the same *place* anymore. But I *do*, I *miss* the community. . . . That's a *cultural experience* to me, that I will *never* have again.

On one of his podcasts, Aaron said that his efforts as a humanist chaplain are directed toward building "something that [is] *thoroughly secular*, and yet *emotionally resonant*." He means "secular" in the sense of *absence* of religion, not *antithesis* of religion. In other words, he wants it to be *secular but not superficial*. It may be that the HUMANIST identity frame *does* encompass all of the meanings and values included within the FIGURATIVE SPIRITUALITY frame, but that *in practice*, humanism has difficulty delivering all of the interpersonal connection and emotional support of a community that institutional religions successfully produce.

Before his deconversion, Paul could tell people, "I'm a pastor," and that identity would communicate a great many things about him—most notably, the fact that his chief

concerns are with the nonsuperficial side of life ("that soul side of life", as he put it).

I asked him if he had found any new labels that could communicate those same aspects of

his identity that the "pastor" label had:

> [Laughter] My wife and I talk about this all the time because, like, just last Saturday we
> went to a wedding where we were going to be sitting at a table with a bunch of people we
> didn't know at the reception. And I'm like, "Honey, what am I gonna tell them what I
> do?" [laughter] And we always struggle with that. I don't want to just say, "I'm involved
> with spirituality." That has a lot of *implications*, right? So I *am* nervous when I get to the
> "spiritual" part. When I say I'm an artist, people usually get that. But when I say,
> "I critique what's wrong with the Church, and Christianity, and belief," then *that's* like
> throwing a little grenade in there. You know?

I then asked him, if someone with a New Age worldview were to read the description of

his online community (in which he used the word "spiritual" four times), does he think

they might assume it was a New Age group?

> They probably would. And that's why I have a problem using *any* of these words. Like
> "believe." Somebody says, "Are you a believer?" I know if I say "Yes" then they're
> gonna *imagine* a whole *world* of what that means, right?

In that short quote, Paul describes the fear of identity misfire and the desire to avoid a

foiled identity shared by most of the participants in this study. This is the conundrum

faced by anyone who chooses to avoid the "religious" or "spiritual" labels, but who has

what could be described as a religious or spiritual temperament or personality.

The following exchange with Melissa, worth quoting in its entirety, encapsulates the

entire problem I have been investigating:

> INTERVIEWER: So then the question is, what kind of language can we use, without falling
> back on religious/spiritual language, to express our—for lack of a better term, our
> "ultimate concerns"? Without the religious and spiritual language, how do we talk about
> that side of ourselves?

MELISSA: Yeah. I actually wrote about the idea of "transcendence," or *wonder*, or *awe*. And part of my argument has *always* been that one of the *huge* limiting factors of the "atheist community," one of the challenges is that, *within* that group of people, there are a *lot* of people who are very—they're *feelers*—or they're, like, the *artistic* types. They're the people like *my husband*, who will probably *never* call himself an "atheist," even though he doesn't believe there's a god. And "agnostic" is probably even a little bit too harsh for him. Because he's an *artist*, he's a *feeler*. He was always the one who experienced God in a *much* more emotional way—deep in his *soul*, you know. Where is the place for *those* people in atheism? Because we *still have* those feelings. We still look up at the *stars* and think about how far away they are, and just—*how do you describe that feeling*? And there's just so many moments of *awe*, and *transcendence*, and *wonder*, and, and—*for lack of a better way of putting it*: *spiritual!* You know: *spiritual experiences*. But, you know, they're *NOT* "spiritual" experiences! [laughter] But there's no other way to describe it! [laughter]

INTERVIEWER: Right. So your husband doesn't want to use the words "agnostic" or "atheist" because those imply that all of *that* is *absent*?

MELISSA: Yes. Exactly!

INTERVIEWER: Okay. And if you talk about that with a word like "transcendence," *then* what are people going to assume?

MELISSA: *Yeah!* [laughter] Yeah. That you're *crazy*, probably. [laughter] Because then it becomes this, like, "*WOOOOO*"—kind of, you know, *out there*.

INTERVIEWER: "Woo." [laughter] Right. So let's say you're talking to somebody who's New Agey, and you use words like "transcendent" or "spiritual," what are they going to assume you mean by those words?

MELISSA: *Yeah!* Yep. Yep.

INTERVIEWER: So if you want to talk about, *all of that*, what words do you have? Because to non-humanists, "humanist" doesn't really communicate that aspect about us.

MELISSA: *No!* And even if you go into it so far as to *explain* it to somebody in great depth, they're still just like: "Well, isn't that just like *being a good person*?" And, you know — *yeah*. But there *is* a philosophical underpinning to being a good person. Like, what *compels* you to be a good person? What do you *believe* about that *world*, and about humanity's role in the world that *makes* you be a good person? Like, what does that even *mean*?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah. And even the American Humanist Association has adopted this slogan of "Good Without God" from Greg Epstein. But is that all humanism really

means, that you're good without God? And if that's the case, if that's all humanism is communicating, then how do we communicate…

[Simultaneously]
INTERVIEWER: …the rest.
MELISSA: …the *rest*.

MELISSA: *Yeah!* Yeah, *exactly!* It *is!* It *is* complicated.

Complicated it most certainly is. To say that "spiritual experiences" are *not* "spiritual experiences"? Such a statement is difficult to comprehend unless we recognize that she is contending with two highly disparate senses of the word "spiritual" within a single thought. What she was saying, if we parse out the senses, is that those moments of awe and wonder are "*figurative* spiritual experiences," but not "*supernatural* spiritual experiences." Many of the other participants also mentioned these kinds of experiences:

> STEPHEN: I *do* think, you know, I can sit out on the swing on a starry night and look up and you know, you see this awesome, wondrous sky, and you realize it goes on for light years, you know, and you can't help but have a sense of *wonder* about those things.

> LUKE: You can be an atheist and you can be *moved* by music, or moved by a mountain, in a way that sometimes is hard to put into words. You know. I could be moved to tears by a piece of classical music. And, where did those tears come from? *I* don't know. So, you know, there's something about us as *human beings* that can be very mysterious. And I try to, sometimes, to plumb that, to try to *understand* that. But I think that just, again, how I'm *wired*.

> BETHANY: For me, moments of awe are all about things that resonate—things that are kind of the universal emotional events. . . . All of those little things, from the birth of my son to being there as someone is dying and just spending time with them in their final moments. All of those things *matter*, and it evokes the same emotion in me as they would in other people who call themselves religious. And I think religious people might find that shocking.

If we do not want to call such experiences "spiritual," due to the supernatural connotations, what then do we call them? When I put that question to each of the participants, it was almost always met with long silence, but I could hear those proverbial

wheels turning as they tried to come up with an answer, only to find that they could not. The part of my conversation with Luke just prior to the quote above is a good example:

> LUKE: I try to keep an open mind about meditation. But again, for me personally, I would not therefore call myself a "spiritual person." Because, again, everybody's got their understanding of what that means. . . . But, for me, if being spiritual means that there's some sort of an external force in the universe out there, or force that I'm connecting with? No, I don't really see it that way.

> INTERVIEWER: Okay. So, if you were talking with someone else who you knew was also an atheist who doesn't typically use the religious language like that, what language would you use to describe that side of you that is interested in the—for lack of a better term—the deeper meanings of life, for example?

> LUKE: [Long pause…] Hmm. [Long pause…] Um. [Longer pause…]

> INTERVIEWER: So, I think other people would say, "I'm spiritual," right? And to them that kind of encompasses *all* that. But if you don't want to say you're "spiritual"—because, as you said, if you're talking to an atheist, they might interpret that as you saying you believe in supernatural spirits—how would you describe that to other atheists—other nonbelievers—other "nonsupernaturalists"?

> LUKE: [Long pause…] Um. [Long pause…] [Laughter] I *really am* thinking here! [laughter]. Uhhh. I guess I would [Pause.] [Sigh.] I would [Pause.] If somebody is an atheist and I'm trying to describe my openness to the deeper questions and the deeper experiences of life? I guess I would just try to phrase it that way. I'm not sure what labels I could use.

In his classic study of religious experiences and values, Abraham Maslow acknowledged the difficulty presented by our limited vocabulary. Lacking a neutral label as a reference for nonreligious people who are, nonetheless, "aware of Tillich's 'dimension of depth'" (i.e., nonsuperficial), he awkwardly referred to them as "serious" people, and put that word, along with the word "religionize," in quotation marks to indicate that he recognized their inadequacy:

> [It is] my impression that "serious" people of all kinds tend to be able to "religionize" *any* part of life, *any* day of the week, in *any* place, and under all sorts of circumstances. . . . Of course, it would not occur to the more "serious" people who are

non-theists to put the label "religious experiences" on what they were feeling, or to use such words as "holy," "pious," "sacred," or the like. ([1963] 1970:31)

Indeed, one of Maslow's stated goals was "to demonstrate that spiritual values have naturalistic meaning, . . . that they do not need supernatural concepts to validate them" ([1963] 1970:4). By the time he wrote the preface to the 1970 reprint, he confessed that he had been unable to find a better label for such people. "Existentialism," he conceded, "is used in so many different ways by different people, . . . [that] the word is now almost useless, in my opinion, and had better be dropped. The trouble is that I have no good alternative label to offer" ([1963] 1970:xvii). Scholars today who have taken up the mantle of studying this topic are still struggling to find an adequate moniker for such people.

Alternative identity work is essentially the same method of social change advocated by George Lakoff in his book, *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2014). Applying his cognitive frame analysis techniques to politics, he explained how, over the past several decades, conservative politicians have established the language used in political discourse, and thus determined which cognitive frames are activated for various hot-button issues. (For example, referring to tax cuts as "tax *relief*" activates a TAX RELIEF frame, which evokes a image of being afflicted by something that needs to be relieved, and the politician can then position himself as the one who can provide that relief.) He explained that if you continue to use the language of your opponents, even when arguing against them, you will continue to activate those frames, and thus *reinforce* them: "When you argue against someone on the other side using their language and their frames, you are activating their

frames, strengthening their frames in those who hear you, and undermining your own views" (2014:xii).

Lakoff's advice, then, is to stop using the words of the opposition entirely, and to work toward creating new words with new frames, based on your own values: "Because language activates frames, new language is required for new frames. Thinking differently requires speaking differently" (2014:xiii). The question then becomes: How do we develop *new identity labels*, and *new cognitive frames* to give substance to those labels? All of the participants recognized the problem, but none could think of a solution:

> THOMAS: I realize the problem. Because if we don't have the language, use the language, maybe at times *insist* upon it, we leave ourselves below the radar. I think we *need* new words, but I just don't know what they are. . . . [When I was a Christian] I used the language that I felt was *meaningful*. But also, that language had a *long* history that I did nothing to create. I think we're at that point. I don't even know how we change the conversation on this. I really don't. But I *do* think that working on it is better than throwing up our hands and *not*.

> CHERYL: I think it's *because* we don't yet have a *word* that replaces "spiritual" that doesn't have that "otherworldly" connotation. This is part of the *challenge*. You know? I don't really *know* a word for that. But what we're talking about, it's when you *explore* what makes us *human*, and how can we make that experience rich and vibrant. . . . I think that we really have to find language to talk about that.

Ryan Cragun and Barry Kosmin (2011) may have been on the right track when they suggested that we already have the language—that it can be found in the many forms of human expression already well-established tradition of *the humanities*. In their critique of a book by Alexander and Helen Astin and Jennifer Lindholm (2010) that recommends teaching "spirituality" to college students, Cragun and Kosmin pointed out a glaring omission:

> The crux of their argument is that colleges do not attend to the "inner" self; they offer students insufficient opportunities to develop self-awareness. Strangely, *that this is one*

of the key aims of the humanities in the liberal arts curriculum is not mentioned.
Instead, it is implied that in order to develop "self-awareness," students need religion.
[emphasis added] (2011:1)

In other words, plenty of "wisdom" has been expressed—independent of any religious or spiritual traditions—by wise, thoughtful individuals throughout history, across many cultures, and through many different styles of communication—philosophy, literature, music, art, poetry, drama, etc. Bethany, the only participant to respond to that question without hesitation, had essentially the same idea:

> BETHANY: It seems like the language of "faith" is kind of like a dead language to me, almost the way that Latin is for the world. That's really how the wordage, and verbiage just doesn't —— it just —— it's an outdated dictionary.
>
> INTERVIEWER: Interesting. So what kind of language have you found to replace it?
>
> BETHANY: I would say that the English language is filled with wonderful ways to describe something that you find meaningful. I mean, I talk about *values* a lot, because I think people *understand* values. And I think they understand the words like *kindness*, and *compassion*. There are a lot of these *simple* words that we use on a regular basis that very, very adequately represent the meaning of the *hoohah* that I used to use. And the other thing is that they *make sense*. They don't need to be *decoded*.

Of all the types of oppositional identity work identified by this study, alternative identity work might have the best chance of affecting real, lasting change. Avoidance of volatile identity labels, of course, only helps individuals in the short term. Dissonant and adaptive identity work are both attempts to change long-standing cultural frames (characterization frames and identity frames, respectively). Although changes of that nature are not unheard of, we know from the literature on intractable conflict mitigation that such changes are extremely difficult, and limited in their effectiveness and scope. The RELIGIOUS and SPIRITUAL identity frames, and the various NONBELIEVER characterization frames, may prove to be impossible to change, at least not to the degree

required. And even if they are changed, the old frames for those words will continue to linger and resurface. As Lakoff said, "framing is social change." By the same token, *framing is identity change*. Finding new language to express values and meanings without supernatural connotations would take a coordinated, cooperative effort, and could take many generations to yield meaningful results. But creating new frames seems to be the only way to eventually leave the old frames behind.

CHAPTER VI

DISCUSSION

Sense Conflation, Conflated Frames, and the Study of Religion

A specific genre of inspirational literature uses deliberate sense conflation as a literary device. New Age and psychiatric spirituality authors such as Deepak Chopra, Thomas Moore, and M. Scott Peck, regularly use words such as *transcendent*, *spirit*, and *soul* without explicitly stating whether they mean something supernatural or not. The power of this literary device comes from carefully using the words in such a way that the reader can interpret them figuratively or literally, or both. The word "soul," for example, is a key term throughout all of Moore's books, but he never explicitly states whether this term refers to some supernatural, disembodied mind that exists after the body dies, or whether he is simply using the word in a figurative sense. By using a word like "soul" in this way, readers are free to supply their own interpretations. Thus, in the minds of a devout Christian or a New Age practitioner the word might activate both the FIGURATIVE SOUL and SUPERNATURAL SOUL frames (the conflated SOUL frame), but only activate the FIGURATIVE SOUL frame in the mind of a secular humanist—and all three can get something of value from reading the book.

Such deliberate use of sense conflation is a perfectly acceptable technique for the self-help and inspirational spirituality genres, and it makes for a fine literary device in

poetry and creative writing (including the religious/spiritual variety). But for the academic study of religion—especially the *scientific* study of religion—such imprecise language is antithetical to the goal of cogent analysis. Far too often, professional social scientists, philosophers, and religious studies researchers use words such as *spiritual*, *transcendent*, *soul*, *divine*, and *sacred* without ever explicitly stating whether they are using the terms figuratively/metaphorically. Consider the following two examples.

Kelly Besecke has done brilliant sociological research on people having nonsuperficial conversations "in otherwise 'secular' settings such as bookstores, lecture halls, movie theaters, and cafes" (2005:181). To indicate that these conversations are more than secular (i.e., more than superficial), she spreads the category of "religion" around such activity by interpreting it as a form of *invisible religion* (Luckmann 1967), defining religion broadly as "a societal conversation about transcendent meaning" (2005:181). Nowhere throughout her writings could I find an explicit statement indicating whether "transcendent" is meant to be understood in an ontological, supernatural, otherworldly sense or a metaphorical, figurative sense that could include a "this-worldly" notion of transcendence. She does, however, define "transcendent meaning" in terms that clearly *imply* some kind of inherent purpose or significance built-in to the universe:

> The idea of transcendent meaning implies an ultimate context, beyond other contexts, that provides eternal, cosmic significance. . . . '[T]he transcendent' refers to a context for life that exists on a plane beyond apparent reality (2002:32).

With the figurative and supernatural senses left conflated, readers are left to their own interpretations. Although Besecke avoids the term "supernatural," I am not sure what else she could mean by a "plane beyond apparent reality" on which a "context for life" *exists*. She never elaborates upon just where this plane might be located, nor of what

unknown substance such a plane might consist, but she clearly indicates that it is not

something of the natural world. Nor is it clear what the word "plane" even means in this

context. Are we to think of something akin to the supernatural realms of existence in the

Dungeons & Dragons fantasy role-playing game—the "Astral Plane" and "Ethereal

Plane"? Use of such language obfuscates rather than clarifies intended meaning.

Peter Berger's seminal work, *The Sacred Canopy*, has been a staple of religious

studies curricula for over forty years. Part of its appeal as a broadly applicable work of

scholarship in the study of religion is its neutral and naturalistic approach to the subject.

It is neither an apologetic for any one religion, nor a polemic against religion in general;

rather, it offers an intriguing metaphorical model with which to conceptualize such a

complex social phenomenon. Berger does not explicitly indicate whether or not he is

talking of something supernatural with concepts like the "sacred canopy."

Berger's ambiguity on that point came back to bite him, as it were: within two years

after its publication, Berger felt misgivings about the way he had portrayed religion. He

realized that the book "read like a treatise on atheism," and that it could "easily be

read . . . as a counsel of despair for religion in the modern world." Worried about "the

possible effect of *The Sacred Canopy* upon the unwary reader" (1969:ix–x), he wrote a

corrective sequel—*A Rumor of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the

Supernatural*—in which he defended the importance of supernatural belief to religion,

explaining that "the term, particularly in its everyday usage denotes a fundamental

category of religion, namely the assertion or belief that there is *an other reality*, and one

of ultimate significance for man, which transcends the reality within which our everyday

experience unfolds" (1969:2).

Sense conflation also has a deleterious effect on quantitative research. The Pew Forum's survey question, "Do you believe in God or a universal spirit?", is an excellent example of a survey measure gone awry by inattentiveness to sense conflation. The vast majority of believers conceive of the word "God" with one or more varieties of the SUPERNATURAL, PERSONAL DEITY frame, an ontologically real being with a personality, who created the universe, cares for human beings, listens to prayers, and acts in the world (Hutsebaut & Verhoeven 1995; Barrett & Keil 1996; Kunkel et al. 1999)—that is, an *ontological* sense of the word "God." A relatively small segment of believers conceives of the same word in a broad, non-personal sense, typically articulated with phrases such as "higher power," "guiding force," "universal spirit," and so forth. These divergent meanings are distinct enough that it is fair to say that belief in the existence of a "universal spirit" is not at all the same as belief in the existence of a "supernatural, personal deity." The Pew Forum, however, asks a single question for both concepts, then *conflates the two* into the single word "God" by dropping the "or universal spirit" part when they display the variable in official graphs, tables, and reports. It is the equivalent of a bait-and-switch. The quality of survey questions (and hence of the data they provide) could be greatly enhanced if question developers had a better understanding of cognitive frames and took into account the disparities in the frames their words might activate in the minds of the respondents.

A relatively new set of theoretical terminology has been gaining currency recently: *vertical transcendence* versus *horizontal transcendence* (e.g.: Hood, Hill & Spilka 2009; Streib & Hood 2013; Coleman, Silver & Holcombe 2013). The two concepts can be thought of as "otherworldly/supernatural transcendence" versus "worldly/naturalistic

transcendence." Keller, Coleman, and Silver (2016) are at least explicit about the fact that they are merely substituting one term for another:

> Does the person refer to higher powers, to a supernatural world beyond? This we would call vertical transcendence. Or is the person invested in concerns beyond their own personal life, concerns, which, framed in a theological vocabulary, might be called "ultimate"? Then we would speak of horizontal transcendence. (2016:258)

Streib and Hood (2016), on the other hand, suggest that the concept of "transcendence" should be considered one of the primary characteristics of religion, and substantive beliefs in divine beings and supernatural agents only secondary (2016:9). They then explicitly state that they do *not* want to divide "transcendent experiences" into natural and supernatural so that they can talk about naturalistic transcendence as "horizontal transcendence" (2016:10). This rationale begs the question: If what we really mean by these phrases is a feeling of transcendence that involves a sense of something beyond, above, or higher than the natural world, as compared to a feeling of transcendence that involves only experiences in the natural world, why then do we feel the need to avoid the obvious nomenclature of *supernatural transcendence* versus *naturalistic transcendence*? Why do we go out of our way to find euphemisms for these terms? By playing such semantic games, rather than increasing clarity and precision (as Streib and Hood claim) we are creating more obfuscation and confusion.

The issue of supernaturalism seems to be a sort of elephant in the room when it comes to discussions about religion and religious beliefs. *Are* we talking about something supernatural or are we *not?* Do we mean "transcendent" in a naturalistic (figurative/metaphorical) sense, or in a supernatural (literal/ontological) sense? Far too often it is impossible to discern the intended meaning. So when we read Robert Fuller state that "secular interests . . . lack any concern with a larger reality" (2001:8), we are left

wondering: Is he referring to some kind of ontologically real, supernatural realm of existence, consisting of some unknown substance, and located somehow outside of or beyond the natural world? Or is he referring merely to the reality of the lived experiences that give human beings an understanding that they are but one part of the larger whole of society, or a sense of their small place in an incomprehensively large cosmos, which they might describe *figuratively* as "transcendent"? To add insult to injury, many scholars of religion and spirituality avoid overtly referencing the supernatural nature of their subject by shrouding it in ever more ambiguous euphemisms, sometimes attempting to lend them weight through capitalization: Divine, Mystery, Ultimate, Absolute, Infinite, Transcendent, and on and on.

Conflated Frames and Religious Terminology

When the senses of a word are conflated—that is, when the word is always (or nearly always) spoken without the intended sense clearly indicated, or with *both* intended—a frame for each sense is activated *as a single conflated frame* in the minds of those involved in the communication. When someone speaks or hears the word "spiritual," for example, all the various attributes of both the FIGURATIVE SPIRITUALITY and SUPERNATURAL SPIRITUALITY frames are activated in the mind as a single, conflated SPIRITUALITY frame. Even in the minds of people who do not believe that anything supernatural exists, when they hear the word "spiritual," both frames are activated.

When supernaturalist believers use words like *spiritual*, *divine*, *soul*, and *transcendent*, they have no reason to distinguish between the two senses. They will use the words with *both* senses in mind, and may not even be aware that they hold two

disparate frames in their minds simultaneously for the same word. Indeed, they may not

consider them to be disparate at all. The two frames are always fused into one conflated

frame, and the supernaturalist would have no occasion to think of one without the other.

It would never occur to them to even *conceive* of one without the other—it simply goes

without saying that spiritual sentiments and practices include supernatural beliefs of some

sort, even if only vague and subtle.

For anyone studying and writing about religion, this is a real problem. Although

supernaturalist believers have no need to distinguish the two, *social scientists do*—we

might even say that we have an *obligation* to do so, out of scholarly integrity. Durkheim,

for example, *did* (eventually) get explicit about the fact that when he spoke about "the

sacred" and "god," he was *not* talking about something supernatural (something "real,"

yes, but not something supernatural).

The word "God" suffers from severe sense conflation, which I suspect is one of the

main sources of negative characterizations of nonbelievers. In its figurative sense, the

word "God" is an *enormous* symbol, representing all values, virtues, hopes, emotions,

and experiences in life that humans most deeply cherish. Ministers, apologists, and

theologians repeatedly (and sometimes aggressively) assert that without God there can be

no love, no joy, no morality, no hope, and so forth—that God is the source of all those

things, and that without "Him" we would be existentially destitute. All of those meanings

and values are concentrated within the FIGURATIVE GOD frame. Because the word "God"

is also almost always conceived of as either a supernatural deity, or supernatural force or

power ("universal spirit") of some kind, the FIGURATIVE GOD frame is rarely activated

separately from the SUPERNATURAL GOD frame—indeed, the two seem almost

inseparable. So, when the word "God" is uttered, it activates the SUPERNATURAL GOD

frame along with the FIGURATIVE GOD frame, and for a great many people, one cannot be thought of without the other.

Because religious terms are almost always used in a conflated state, and have been for so many centuries, even if we attempt to use the word *only* in its figurative sense, both frames will still be activated. As Lakoff likes to demonstrate: if you are told, "Don't think of an elephant," you cannot keep the ELEPHANT frame from being activated in your brain, even though you were told not to. In order to use a word like "spiritual" in *only* its figurative sense, you would have to repeatedly remind everyone involved in the communication that only the figurative sense should be kept in mind (the caveat). The question then becomes: Is that possible? Can they be separated? Those are difficult questions, which I cannot answer here. Since cognitive frames are *automatically* activated upon hearing a word (or any other symbol), I *suspect* that the unintended sub-frame cannot be *fully* suppressed. But to determine that would require extensive, rigorous social psychological experiments (for any social psychologist who is up to the challenge).

Negation of Conflated Frames and the Stigma of Nonbelief

As discussed in the previous section, the word "spiritual" activates the conflated SPIRITUAL frame—a fusion of the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL and SUPERNATURALLY SPIRITUAL frames—in the mind of the listener. What happens, then, when someone says, "I'm *not* spiritual"? As Lakoff explained, even "when we *negate* a frame, we evoke the frame [emphasis added]" (2014:xii). Hence, even when someone says, "I'm *not* spiritual," the conflated SPIRITUAL frame is activated. The qualifying presence of the negative particle "not," however, changes the cognitive process, so that when "*not*

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spiritual" is heard, two things occur in the mind of the listener. First, the word "spiritual" activates the listener's conflated SPIRITUAL frame, so that all the meanings contained within both the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL and SUPERNATURALLY SPIRITUAL frames are brought to mind. Second, because the identity label was negated by the word "not," a new frame is automatically generated—a *negation* of the conflated SPIRITUAL frame, which includes negated versions of *both* sub-frames.

When the conflated SPIRITUAL frame in the mind of a believer is negated by someone saying, "I'm not spiritual," the conflated NONSPIRITUAL characterization frame contains *the opposites of all those character traits* contained within the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL frame. Consequently, even though the nonbeliever only meant to negate the SUPERNATURALLY SPIRITUAL frame, the fact that the frames are conflated means that the listener will get the impression that the person does not possess those character traits represented by the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL frame. Hence, the nonbeliever end up with a severe identity misfire, and most likely a *spoiled* identity. This applies equally to the negation of the conflated RELIGIOUS frame activated by saying "I'm not religious" or "I'm secular" (since "secular" is equivalent to "not religious"). The believer with a conflated NONSPIRITUAL characterization frame does not necessarily explicitly think words such as, "This person who says he is not spiritual must be a shallow, superficial person with no meaning or purpose in life." Cognitive frames are not necessarily manifest in that way in our brains. Nonetheless, that impression will be present to some degree.

A similar process occurs for the word "God." When a person says, "I don't believe in God," the word "God" activates the entire conflated GOD frame in the listener, which includes all the attributes of the FIGURATIVE GOD frame, such as *love, grace, compassion, community,* and so forth. The word "don't" then *negates* the entire conflated GOD frame.

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The negation of the conflated GOD frame contains the opposite meanings of both the SUPERNATURAL GOD and FIGURATIVE GOD frames. Consequently, when the listener hears someone say, "I don't believe in God," he or she understands the person as rejecting all those values that the figurative sense of the word "God" symbolizes.

The words "nonbeliever," "godless," and "atheist" are analogous to "don't believe in God," and so negate the conflated GOD frame in the same way. Take a moment to re-read the first paragraph of chapter one, and try to recall what impressions or feelings were automatically activated in your mind when you read the words "study of nonbelievers" and "do not believe that anything supernatural exists." Think especially about what came to mind when you first read the word "atheist" in that paragraph. Chances are high that some negative characterizations came to mind, to a greater or lesser extent. So when someone says, "I'm an atheist," the ATHEIST frame activated in the mind of the listener is equivalent to the negation of the conflated GOD frame. That applies equally to the word "godless," which is why a phrase such as "godless communist" is such an emotively powerfully pejorative; to say that someone is "godless" is to imply that the person is against all the values that the FIGURATIVE GOD frame stands for.

The effect of negating the conflated GOD frame helps partially explain why some people—including some theologians, such as John Shelby Spong, Don Cupitt, Lloyd Geering, and others—continue to talk of "God" even when they do not themselves believe that a supernatural deity exists. Essentially, they are using the phenomena of sense conflation and conflated frames to their advantage. By continuing to use "God-language" in the figurative sense, they are able to talk about all the meanings and values contained within the FIGURATIVE GOD frame and still be accepted by believers, because just speaking the word "God" puts believers at ease by activating the entire conflated GOD

frame, so that they assume the speaker holds those same values. For a religious public speaker such as Diana Butler Bass, who holds an impersonal, PANENTHEISTIC GOD frame, envisioned as some kind of a universal, divine presence or force (Bass 2015; Bell 2015), continuing to use the word "God" allows her to deliver sermons in churches where a completely different GOD frame is activated in the minds of the majority of her audience when they hear her say the word "God."

We also have a conflated CHRISTIAN frame in our culture. The word "Christian" has an obvious literal sense: an adherent of the Christian religion (or at least someone who self-identifies as Christian), but it is also used in a figurative sense, to designate someone *as a good person*, as in: "That was very Christian of him," or "That was a very Christian thing to do." The literal CHRISTIAN ADHERENT frame and the figurative GOOD CHRISTIAN frame are fused together into a single conflated CHRISTIAN frame activated by the word "Christian." The figurative GOOD CHRISTIAN frame represents all the values that Christianity ostensibly stands for. So when someone says, "I'm *not* a Christian," with the CHRISTIAN ADHERENT frame in mind—or even "I'm *against* Christianity," with the INSTITUTIONAL CHRISTIANITY frame, or even the ABUSIVE CHRISTIAN CLERGY frame in mind—the negation of the entire conflated CHRISTIAN frame indicates to the listener that that person is against all the values that Christianity stands for.

When nonbelievers say, "I'm not spiritual" their NONSPIRITUAL identity frames consist of the rejection of only the SUPERNATURALLY SPIRITUAL frame, not necessarily the rejection of the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL frame. Nonbelievers may very well hold *an equivalent* identity frame that contains all the same character traits, values, and meanings contained within the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL frame, such as *gratitude*, *love*, *joy*, *meaning in life*, *compassion*, *wisdom*, *values*, *emotive person*, and *profound person*; they

just do not label it with the word "spiritual." The trouble—as the responses from the

participants of this study indicated— is that they cannot find an identity label that

sufficiently communicates the full breadth and depth of meaning contained within their

equivalent of the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL frame, and thus have difficulty communicating

that part of their identities to others.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Enchantment without the Supernatural

At the 2016 annual meeting of the Association for the Sociology of Religion, I sat listening to a presentation about Canadian "religious nones." When the presenter mentioned people who say that they are "not spiritual," a woman sitting beside me made the following offhanded remark: "It would be really hardline to say, 'I'm not spiritual.'" I turned my head quizzically, then wrote her comment in my notebook. Such a perfect example, I thought, of the conflated SPIRITUAL frame. Why would saying "I'm not spiritual" be considered a "hardline" position? She could understand why people would say "I'm not religious," meaning only that they have an aversion to the institution of religion (i.e., they reject the INSTITUTIONAL RELIGION frame). Moreover, when someone says, "I'm spiritual but not religious," that clearly indicates that they are not averse to "being religious" in a *figurative* sense—they simply use the word "spiritual" to indicate that. To say "I'm not spiritual" seemed "hardline" to her because the conflated SPIRITUAL frame was activated in her mind, then negated, leading her to interpret the statement as a rejection of the FIGURATIVELY SPIRITUAL frame.

As scholars of religion, we rightly attempt to understand religion from all of its dimensions and manifestations. Sometimes, we have a tendency to downplay the role of

supernatural beliefs in our attempt to understand the phenomenon of religion from a broader perspective. Streib and Hood even stipulated that belief should be considered secondary to *transcendence* and *ultimate concern* (2016:9). But belief in something supernatural *does* seem to be of significant consequence for a great many people. The leaders of Cheryl's denomination, after all, decided that she was "unsuitable for ministry" because she openly, explicitly stated her disbelief in the supernatural. In Marcel Harper's study of stereotypes toward nonreligious people, exploratory factor analysis revealed six subtypes, and he found that "the most unfavorable subtype was related to a perceived disbelief in religion and spirituality" (2007:539).

Charles Taylor framed his entire inquiry into the "Secular Age" in terms of *belief* versus *unbelief*—"on what it's like to live as a believer or an unbeliever" (2007:5). He composed an 874-page tome to ponder the puzzle of how it could possibly have come about that belief in the existence of God is considered *one option among many*, when back in the 1500s nonbelief was almost unthinkable. And he was not speaking figuratively when he wrote of "God" and "the transcendent." As Warner, VanAntwerpen, and Calhoun observed: "Taylor really means 'belief.' He doesn't want to see religion as just a number of engaging practices or quasi-ethnic customs, and he is critical of suggestions that the 'essence of religion' lies in the answers it offers to the 'question of meaning'" (2010:10).

The conflated SPIRITUAL and RELIGIOUS frames are extremely difficult to separate into their FIGURATIVE and SUPERNATURAL sub-frames. To many, it does not seem possible that the figurative meanings could be sufficient *without* the supernatural beliefs. We see evidence of this in the fact that many prominent philosophers, theologians, and apologists argue that, if a nonbeliever's sense of meaning, value, and purpose in life does *not*

include a supernaturally transcendent element—an *ultimate* meaning to the universe as opposed to mere local, temporal meaning to life in the here and now—then that sense of meaning cannot be quite meaningful enough. In his influential essay, "An Awareness of What Is Missing," renowned philosopher Jürgen Habermas tried to articulate "an expression of melancholy over something which has been irretrievably lost," by modernity's displacement of religion. Similarly, Sidney Britcho and Richard Harries edited a collection of essays in which, as the title states, they give *Two Cheers for Secularism*—meaning that they *mostly* support secularism. The reason they "cannot give that third cheer" is because "from the perspective of a person with religious faith, the loss of a transcendent order giving a divine meaning and purpose to human existence cannot be contemplated without a poignant sense of loss" (1998:7). Although "supernatural" was not explicit, a "transcendent order", from which "divine meaning and purpose" are conferred, can only be *otherworldly*.

As we saw in quotations from several participants above, since leaving Christianity and abandoning their previous supernatural worldviews, they now believe that this life is the only life they have—that there is no afterlife. Yet they say that this life *is* meaningful enough, and that they no longer feel a need for a supernaturally ultimate meaning to the universe. Philosopher James K. A. Smith argues that such a position is naïve at best, delusional at worst. He concedes that secular people may be happy and content, and that "there doesn't *seem* to be anything missing in their lives [emphasis added]." Nonetheless, he believes that there really *is* something essential missing, that without a supernaturally ultimate meaning, their "existential world is flat" (2014:viii), and that they are either unable or unwilling to recognize it. As he put it, secular people "don't have any sense that the 'secular' lives they've constructed are missing a second floor" (2014:vii). In other

words, for Smith, sacredness is not sacred enough if it comes from mere human values, the way Durkheim described it; sacredness must come from an otherworldly source, as Eliade had envisioned it.

The ex-clergy in this study had once thought as Smith does. They had believed in all the same supernaturally ultimate meaning that he considers so essential. Are we to believe, then, based on Smith's assertion, that these ex-ministers voluntarily "flattened their existential worlds"? Considering that they had been devoted ministers for the majority of their lives, can we really take seriously Smith's assertion that they have now voluntarily chosen to construct secular lives that are "missing a second floor"? Or might it be the case that, as Stephen had said, "it's impossible for some people to wrap their minds around [how life can] have meaning and purpose if there is no God"? Might it be that Smith's SPIRITUALITY frame is so tightly conflated that he is unable to separate its two constituent frames, and thus incapable of grasping what a meaningful, fulfilled life would be like without his particular supernatural worldview?

I would like to propose an alternative interpretation of a long-standing theoretical framework, from which I think Smith's position derives. Smith, Taylor, Habermas, and many others, continue to view the history of modernity within the framework of the Weberian disenchantment narrative (and thus, the religious-secular divide). Many scholars have pointed out that the word Weber used, *entzauberung*, would be more accurately (and *less ambiguously*) translated as "demagification," instead of the traditional "disenchantment" (e.g., Swedberg 2005:62; Schroeder 1992:72). By "demagification of the world," Weber was referring to the loss of belief in *supernatural* magic. He spoke of ancient peoples when "their world was not yet disenchanted of its gods and demons" (1948:148), and when suffering and dying men were "believed either

to be possessed by a demon or burdened with the wrath of a god whom they had insulted." (1948:271). He explained that, as scientific rationalization took hold of Western society, we began to shed the old supernatural/superstitious explanations of the world around us, thus "demagifying" it.

Most commentators have interpreted Weber as saying that disenchantment necessarily leads to meaninglessness, hopelessness, and nihilism (e.g., Greisman 1976:495; Griffin 2001:vii; Skolnik & Gordon 2006:4). Nicholas Gane's explanation is as good an example as any:

> The work of Weber, like that of Nietzsche, identifies in the general process of enlightenment a movement towards nihilism (the devaluation of ultimate values) in the West. . . . [W]ith the onset of the rationalization of culture, ultimate meanings or values are *disenchanted*, or, in Nietzschean terms, which Weber adopts, *devalued*. (2002:2)

The disenchantment narrative of modernity has proved to have great staying power; social critics continue to lament it well into the twenty-first century. Charles Taylor, for example, interpreted disenchantment as meaning "the dissipation of our sense of the cosmos as a meaningful order" (1989:17). In his view, the loss of supernatural transcendence resulted in "a wide sense of malaise at the disenchanted world, a sense of it as flat, empty" (2007:302)—hence the notion of "existentially flat."

In the two preceding paragraphs, I described a *sense disparity*. Magic in the *literal* sense can refer to supernatural powers; magic in the *figurative* sense—which Richard Dawkins calls "poetic magic"—refers to something we find "deeply moving, exhilarating: something that gives us goose bumps, something that makes us feel more alive" (Dawkins 2012:23). Likewise, disenchantment in the literal sense can mean the loss of belief in supernatural magic; disenchantment in the figurative sense means disappointment or disillusionment with something once held in high regard. By drawing

out this distinction I am suggesting that the most common understanding of the classic

Weberian disenchantment narrative is manifest in our minds as *a conflated*

DISENCHANTMENT frame, consisting of the SUPERNATURAL DISENCHANTMENT and

FIGURATIVE DISENCHANTMENT frames fused together over almost a century of conflating

these two senses of the words "magic" and "disenchantment." Hence, Talal Asad

described disenchantment not as just a loss of myth and magic, but as "a stripping away

of myth, magic, *and the sacred* [emphasis added]" (2003:13). For James Smith, Sidney

Britcho, Richard Harries, and so many others, the word "disenchantment" activates this

conflated DISENCHANTMENT frame. Consequently, they seem to believe that enchantment

in the figurative sense cannot be entirely fulfilling without the supernatural. Or to put it

into Taylor's (2007) terminology, a life lived solely within the "immanent frame" (i.e.,

naturalistically) cannot be quite as fulfilling or meaningful as life lived within the

"transcendent frame" (i.e., with some form of supernatural worldview).

Human beings, individually and collectively as a society across many generations,

determine the nature and content of our most cherished meanings and values. Are we

really *devaluing* those meanings and values (as Nicholas Gane suggested) by dispensing

with beliefs in their supposed supernatural origins? Is the world really disenchanted in the

figurative sense if no supernatural beings or "planes" exist? I am suggesting that the

common interpretation of the disenchantment narrative, being based on a conflated

DISENCHANTMENT frame, is a *non sequitur*: it *does not follow* that loss of belief in the

existence of *supernatural magic* necessarily leads to a loss of a sense of *poetic magic* in

life.

Yet that is precisely what is implied by the common interpretation espoused by

James Smith, J. P. Moreland, and so many others: that the rainbow is somehow less

poetically magical without the supernatural magic of a leprechaun's pot-o'-gold; that the depth of love and adoration we feel for our spouses is somehow less *poetically enchanting* without the blessing of a supernatural deity (or a shot from Cupid's bow); that the experience of looking skyward on a dark Arizona night, and feeling engulfed by the vast expanse of our galaxy, is somehow less emotionally moving without believing that a supernatural deity is looking down upon us from the heavens—or at least that some supernaturally divine *something* is present. As the late Douglas Adams wrote: "Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too?" (1979:118).

I cannot definitively state that they are wrong. I can only point to the responses of the 15 participants in this study who have experienced life from both sides. They had believed for many years, with every ounce of their being, in the supernatural tenets of their religions. At some point in their lives, they were able to separate the conflated SPIRITUALITY frame and disengage the SUPERNATURAL SPIRITUALITY sub-frame without losing the content of the FIGURATIVE SPIRITUALITY sub-frame. Now that they no longer believe that anything supernatural exists, they say that their lives have *not* become "existentially flat." Some even stated that their lives have become all the more expansive, significant, and full of awe and wonder since they stopped believing in the supernatural. As Eric Maisel put it, "it can prove a transformational and mind-opening experience to put all gods, religions, and supernatural enthusiasms aside and to explore the world from the point of view of a human being who lives, dies, and is as natural as a tiger or a dove" (2009:1). To revisit Peter Berger's metaphor, they stepped outside the sacred canopies of their religions, and rather than falling into a dark abyss of chaos, they found that there was just as much "sacredness" (figuratively speaking) outside the sacred canopy as

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within—it just takes other forms and goes by other names. Based on the words they have written and the conversations I have had with them, I can say that they are not secular in the *antithesis of the religious* sense. In all other senses of the word, however, they are completely *secular*, but their lives are most definitely *not superficial*.

Summary of Contributions

I have combined three established theoretical frameworks from disparate academic disciplines into a unique composite framework which I hope will prove mutually beneficial to all three fields of research. The concepts of identity frames and characterization frames from the field of intractable conflict mitigation fit like a glove onto the framework of oppressive and oppositional identity work from the field of social psychology. The Frame Semantics approach to cognitive frame analysis, from the field of cognitive linguistics, provides a more substantial method for identifying and analyzing those identity and characterization frames. Taken together, these three frameworks complement and enhance one another.

To that composite framework, I added my own framework of new theoretical concepts which I developed through the process of analytic induction as they gradually emerged from my analysis of the data. I have attempted to explicate this new set of concepts so that they can be applied to a broad range of semantic analysis in any domain of social discourse. Application of these concepts resulted in an analytic procedure for delving deeper into the *emic* meanings of religious and nonreligious identity labels, and religious terminology in general. The purpose of this procedure is to go beyond verbal

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definitions and uncover and analyze the cognitive frames that form the substance of meaning for those words.

The general procedure is as follows: When analyzing a discourse, identify pivotal words or phrases and determine the definitional senses each side is using for those terms. Closely observe key descriptors and metaphors that give insight into the content of the *cognitive frames* that those words activate for each side. Watch for caveats being used to qualify those terms, indicating that a side is using specific senses, and thus has specifically circumscribed cognitive frames in mind. As cognitive frames become clearly discernable, label them with unique names so that they can be more readily analyzed. Look for the presence of *sense disparity* and *frame disparity* in the use of those pivotal terms on both sides of the discourse. Determine whether the disparities are minor and inconsequential, or whether they are causing significant misapprehension and miscommunication. Watch closely for *multiple* disparate senses and frames in use simultaneously for any given word or phrase, and determine whether those involved are aware of the disparate meanings those words hold for them. Take note of any *sense conflation*, and identify any *conflated frames*. If any of the words are being negated by words such as "not" or "don't," determine the content of the *negated* versions of the cognitive frames activated by those terms—especially the conflated frames. If the pivotal words or phrases are used as *identity labels*, determine whether any sense disparities, frame disparities, conflated frames, or negated frames are causing an *identity misfire*, and whether the misfire results in a stigmatized (spoiled) identity or a *foiled identity*.

Additionally, as the title of this thesis implies, I hope to have brought to sufficiently uncovered an identity category that has been routinely overlooked by social scientists of religion. Lost somewhere amongst the category of religious "nones," no one takes much

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notice of this group because they do not fit within any of our culture's conventional categories. They have naturalistic worldviews (not believing that anything *supernatural* exists), and they typically avoid being identified as "religious" or "spiritual" because they do not want others to assume the supernatural worldview implied by those labels. On the other hand, they recognize that because they tend to take seriously the perennial questions and concerns traditionally associated exclusively with religion and spirituality, others might pigeonhole them into those categories. They typically struggle to articulate a self-identity that captures their own explorations of meaning, value, and purpose in life without resorting to the supernaturally laden language of religion and spirituality. This category needs a proper name. "Secular but not superficial" is a sorry excuse for a social identity label (even worse than "spiritual but not religious"). But until a suitable label is found, it will suffice.

Finally, I hope this study will serve as a catalyst for conversation within the enterprise of the scientific study of religion/nonreligion by pulling two key issues out of the closet and laying them on the table. First, the distinction between figurative and supernatural senses of religious language, and the way they are so often ignored and conflated, is rarely if ever directly addressed by scholars of religion. I hope to have demonstrated how important this distinction is, and the consequences of ignoring it. Second, as discussed in the first section of this chapter, many scholars attempt to avoid drawing attention to the supernatural nature of the religious beliefs and practices they study by shrouding them in euphemisms—call it the "euphemization of the supernatural." I have attempted to demonstrate the importance of talking directly about the supernatural sense of religious beliefs rather than skirting around the issue. I hope this sparks a

conversation about why the topic of supernaturalism is so often "shoved under the rug" by obfuscating the language.

General Applicability

The purpose of grounded theory is the "conceptual and theoretical development" (Charmaz 2006:101) of generalized theoretical concepts (Glaser & Strauss 1967:110–111) that can help make sense of complex social phenomena—and ideally be useful across a broad range of social scientific domains. Let us now look closely at an example of religious discourse outside this study, and see how the theoretical concepts I have developed throughout this study can help us to understand what is going on. Then I will briefly show an example of applying some of these concepts to a social domain outside of religion.

Oprah Winfrey's interview with long-distance swimmer Diana Nyad (who self-identifies as an atheist) has become infamous among both self-identified atheists and the social scientists who study nonbelievers. It is awash in cognitive disparities, dissonances, and identity misfires. It also provides a good example of the tendency to deny a secular identity for those who do not fit the preconceived image of the SUPERFICIAL SECULARIST characterization frame. Winfrey began the interview by confronting the issue of Nyad's nonbelief head on:

> WINFREY: You told our producers that you're "not a God person," that you are a person who's "deeply in awe."
>
> NYAD: Yeah. I'm not a God person.

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That negation of Winfrey's conflated GOD frame put a confused, almost *distasteful*

expression on her face as she incredulously asked the follow up question, which Nyad

answered unfazed:

> WINFREY: Do you consider yourself *atheist?*
>
> NYAD: I *am* an atheist. And—

Winfrey cut her off. The confused expression on her face revealed the cognitive

dissonance induced by the incompatible ATHEIST identity frame that Nyad had so matter

of factly thrust into her mind. It made no sense. How could the person sitting before her

call herself an "atheist"? She stammered out a half-question in her confusion, to which

Nyad replied with cool, confident decorum:

> WINFREY: But—you're "*in the awe*."
>
> NYAD: Yeah, but, you know, I don't understand why anybody would find a contradiction
> in that. I can stand at the beach's edge . . . and *weep* with the beauty of this universe, and
> be *moved* by all of humanity. All the billions of people who have lived before us, who
> have loved, and hurt, and suffered. To me, my definition of God *is* humanity, and is the
> *love* of humanity.

Winfrey could not accept what Nyad was saying; the cognitive dissonance was too great.

She was forced to contend with this utterly foreign cognitive frame for what the word

"atheist" means, a frame considerably at odds with the one already in place in her mind.

Her solution was to refuse to accept that foreign cognitive frame, and attempt to reassert

her own by denying Nyad her own self-identity. With her usual air of authority, she

declared that Nyad cannot possibly be an *atheist*—a statement that could easily be

interpreted as Winfrey participating in the oppressive identity work against nonbelievers.

Nyad then attempted to explain to her that all she means is that she does not believe that a

supernatural being or presence exists—and that it does *not* mean that she is superficial:

WINFREY: Well I don't call you an *atheist* then. I think if you believe in the *awe*, and the *wonder*, and the *mystery*, then that *is* what God is. God is not the "bearded guy in the sky."

NYAD: There is an *inference* with "God" that there is a *presence*; there is either a creator or an overseer. . . . For *me*, I'm an atheist who's in awe."

Winfrey slowly repeated that last point, almost to herself, sounding as if she was struggling to grasp the concept: "An 'atheist in awe.'" This demonstrates a fundamental problem with the ambiguity of religious language. Nyad self-identified with the "atheist" label because she understood it to mean nothing more than someone who does not believe that the "bearded guy in the sky" exists. Her ATHEIST frame consisted simply of the ABSENCE OF BELIEF frame, and nothing more. Winfrey insisted that Nyad could not be an atheist because she does not fit Winfrey's preconceived notion that an atheist is someone who does not experience awe, wonder, and mystery—the SUPERFICIAL ATHEIST frame.

Having summarily dismissed the anomalous cognitive frame that had invaded her mind, Winfrey then asked her next question with a knowing grin:

WINFREY: So, do you consider yourself a "spiritual person," even as an atheist?

NYAD: I do. I don't think there's *any* contradiction in those terms. I think you can be an atheist who doesn't believe in an overarching *being* who created all of this and sees over it, but there's spirituality because we human beings—and we animals, and *maybe* even we plants, but certainly the ocean, and the moon, and the stars—we all live with something that is *cherished*, and we *feel* the treasure of it. The older I am, I walk around every day with, you know, flowers, *and buildings* that people created, but certainly *beings*, you know, just, every pair of eyes that I look into, I see the souls.

Once again Nyad asserted her ABSENCE OF BELIEF frame for the "atheist" label, then she seemed to express a *figurative* frame for "spirituality," as that affective aspect of human life that is deeply cherished and treasured. She ended, however, with a statement that

seems to indicate that, although she does not believe in the existence of a supernatural deity, she believes that "souls" exist. Winfrey did not let that one pass by:

> WINFREY: Okay, and how do you define that, the soul?
>
> NYAD: The soul is your "spirit"; it's your love of humanity; it's your belief that there's more than you. There are people before us—you could weep to look at the discovery of an ancient city and realize that those people lived, and they loved, and they danced, and they ate, and they suffered, and, you know, they *lived*, just as we are. So, there have been *so many* 40-, and 60-, and 80-year lives—*billions* of them. And we all have souls, and I feel their collective souls.
>
> WINFREY: Wow. What do you think happens when we die?
>
> NYAD: I think that the soul lives on because we have created so much energy. And when we display courage and hope, it lives on. But I do believe the *body* goes back to ash, and it is never more.

The way she speaks of "soul" and "spirit" is strikingly similar to the way Paul had. At one moment she seems to be talking about the soul as a separate entity—"we all have souls." Then the next moment she describes the soul in unmistakably *figurative* terms— "love of humanity," "belief that there's more than you," the soul lives on as the energy we create "when we display courage and hope." None of these characterizations bear any resemblance to the kind of disembodied mind that most people envision as separating from the body at death and going to some sort of afterlife, with its memories and identity still intact.

Far more interesting, however, is the glimpse into her metaphysical worldview that Nyad revealed in some of her other statements. Was she speaking figuratively about all the living beings who came before her when she said "I feel their collective souls"? Again, the ambiguous nature of these words, and the way she is expressing them, make that difficult to clearly ascertain without speaking to her. The entire context of the conversation, however, indicates that she has something more figurative in mind. Her

sentiment about feeling the collective souls of the billions of lives who came before her sounds like a recognition of the fact that she is the result of, and a constituent part in, the entire history of human societies. It sounded similar to a metaphor George Herbert Mead once wrote, that the human *self* is like "an eddy in the social current, and so still a part of the current" (1935:182).

Observe how Nyad tends to speak in a naturalistically poetic fashion: to "*weep* with the beauty of this universe, and be *moved* by all of humanity"; "the ocean, and the moon, and the stars—we all live with something that is *cherished*." If we extend Mead's metaphor in a broader, naturalistically poetic direction, we could describe a human being as an eddy in the *cosmic current*, and so still a part of the current: matter and energy coalesce into a sentient being, retain that form for a fleeting moment in the vast expanse of time, then disperse again into the continuously flowing current of the cosmos. Charles Lindbergh—another individual, like Nyad, who had achieved an extreme feat of human endurance—expressed this sentiment far more poetically, conceiving of the evolution of life on earth as "an evolving life stream composed of countless selves":

> Individuals are custodians of the life stream—temporal manifestations of far greater being, forming from and returning to their essence like so many dreams. . . . I am one and I am many—myself and humanity in flux. . . . After my death, the molecules of my being will return to the earth and sky. They came from the stars. I am of the stars. (quoted in Taylor 2011:232).

We could call this the COSMIC EXISTENTIAL STREAM frame. It entails an extremely broad sense of "something larger than ourselves"—the cosmos itself—and an understanding of ourselves as being born out of, and returning into, the continuously changing process of existence. If different words had been available to her that offered an alternative to the supenaturalist language of spirituality, would Nyad have used them instead? Again, that is

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impossible to ascertain without speaking with her. But judging by the few words we have from her, Nyad's views seem far more akin to Lindbergh's than to Winfrey's.

Outside of religious discourse, these theoretical concepts can be useful tools for analyzing language in other domains of social interaction. As a brief example, consider how sense disparity and conflation are regularly exploited by politicians. Although Bernie Sanders identifies with the "socialist" label, he is careful to *qualify* that identity label by saying he is a *democratic* socialist (the caveat), thus indicating which *sense* he means. His opponents turn sense disparity to their advantage by deliberate use of *sense conflation* in their attack ads and public discourse. They conflate the multiple senses of the word by relentlessly repeating it *without* the qualifying caveat. Every time the unqualified word "socialist" is uttered in an advertisement or during a debate, it activates the SOVIET SOCIALISM frame in the majority of their supporters. That frame immediately evokes images of a regressive society, destitute people standing in bread lines, loss of freedom, KGB torture, and of course, the ominous threat of *godlessness*. In this way, Sanders' opponents foment and fan the flames of fear within their supporters—a fear that Sanders' supporters never experience from the SCANDINAVIAN SOCIALISM frame activated in their minds by the "socialist" label.

Limitations

Generalizability was not the intent of this study. As Kathy Charmaz explained, grounded theory "is *not* about representing a population or increasing the statistical generalizability of your results" (2006:101). As such, this small, non-random sample of

15 is not generalizable, and these individuals are by no means representative of all ex-ministers—much less all nonbelievers. As just one example: all of these participants deconverted through a deliberate process of doubting, studying, deliberating, and finally consciously coming to the realization that they no longer believed. Many people, on the other hand, never give the matter much thought, and simply drift away from religious belief and participation during their high school or college years (e.g., Ozment 2016:5).

By design, these individuals were chosen as paradigm cases for the "secular but not superficial" identity I was attempting to uncover. Although this study was not meant to be representative and generalizable to all nonbelievers, it is not unreasonable to assume that a certain subset (albeit, an unknown percentage) of the nonbeliever population is similar to this sample in important respects. Just as there are many devoutly religious/spiritual people who do not become ministers, there are undoubtedly many people who identify as neither religious nor spiritual, but who have just as much concern for the nonsuperficial side of life as these ex-ministers, and so should be considered secular but not superficial.

Other studies have explored a much wider variety of nonbelievers. Daniel Dennett and Linda LaScola (2015) published the pioneering research on ministers who have stopped believing. Most of their 35 participants were still active ministers at the time, and were still "in the closet" as nonbelievers, so they were in very different situations from those in this study. Phil Zuckerman's book, *Faith No More* (2011), is an excellent analysis of a heterogeneous sample of 87 nonbelievers in the United States. And Greta Christina (2014) has admirably analyzed over four hundred "coming out atheist" stories of general nonbelievers.

Potential Areas for Further Research

Paradigm Shift as Identity Frame Replacement: One potential area of further research that I began to wonder about, and for which my interviews had not been designed, is what we might call the "point of frame replacement." With the strong negative characterization frames they held about atheists, what kind of cognitive dissonance did it cause in their minds when they started to realize that they were actually becoming atheists? All of the subjects in this study had gone through a radical change. It wasn't instantaneous; in most cases it took several years of reading, study, and self-reflection to build to that point. But at some point in time, each of these subjects realized that the cognitive frames they had harbored for concepts such as *God*, *religion*, *atheism*, *soul*, *secular*, and so forth, had been replaced with entirely different cognitive frames.

It could prove fruitful to analyze such belief system paradigm shifts in terms of cognitive frames, in the manner that Lakoff demonstrates in *Don't Think of an Elephant* (2014). How do people manage to replace such deeply rooted frames that held such significance for their lives? How long does that replacement take? Do they notice it while it was happening, or do they only realize it after the fact? Do they go through a severe existential upheaval? What kind of emotional stress occurs during the replacement process, and what are its lasting effects? In some rare situations, a total inversion of an extremely rigid belief system can lead to PTSD, as happened to Rich Lyons, an ex-Pentecostal minister who described his ordeal on his podcast, *Living After Faith* (Lyons 2010). How often, and to what degree, do such reactions occur?

Re-evaluation of Values after Deconversion: Most religious adherents, it goes without saying, base their values, to a large extent, on the doctrines of their religious

traditions. As with other concepts, values are manifest in the brain as cognitive frames. What happens to those value frames after an individual undergoes a complete replacement of their religious frames? I can say, from my own conversations with fundamentalists who deconverted and became nonbelievers, they tell me that they went through a process of calling into question a large proportion of the things that they had always been taught were "sinful." A study of the effects of deconversion on a person's system of moral judgements, and the process of re-evaluating those judgements, would be instructive for understanding the relation of value systems to particular systems of religious beliefs.

Secular "Ministries": Another area I was unable to explore in depth, but that deserves a proper investigation on its own, is the work of ex-clergy who go on to become "secular ministers," for lack of a better term. Perhaps such a project could find more appropriate terminology for such social activity, to frame it properly without the religious and spiritual language. Humanist chaplaincies at universities (e.g., Greg Epstein at Harvard and Jonathan Figdor at Stanford), intentional communities such as the "secular Sunday school" that William started, online communities such as the one Paul created, and (on a broader scale) movements like *Sunday Assembly* and the *Oasis Network*, all need to be investigated.

Meaningful Life without Supernaturally Ultimate Meaning: In Chapter VI, I quoted James Smith as saying that nonbelievers "don't have any sense that the 'secular' lives they've constructed are missing a second floor" (2014:vii). My interview schedule was not designed to delve deeply into this question. Another study would be useful to specifically focus on the question of whether the meaning, value, and purpose people find

in the "here and now" of their local, temporal lives—with no expectation of a supernatural, eternal afterlife—is somehow insufficient, as Smith suggests.

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