

# The Road to Disbelief: A Study of the Atheist De-Conversion Process

Julie Krueger

Faculty Sponsor: Professor Carol Miller, Department of Sociology and Archeology

## ABSTRACT

Atheism is not only a prevalent but a highly stigmatized element in American society, yet atheists have been denied a voice within sociological literature. As such, our knowledge of atheists is both limited and superficial. To compensate for such shortcomings, I focused my research on the stigmatized and marginalized minority of American atheists. As the atheist identity is generally achieved, rather than ascribed, I had to ask the question: How does one become an atheist? Or what is involved in the de-conversion process that allows one to adopt the atheist identity? Rejecting the fundamental tenets of theism, particularly in the context of the highly religious American culture, cannot be a simple task or an impulsive decision. Adopting an identity, such as the atheist identity, is a process. One does not simply become an atheist on a whim. To do so is to willingly and knowingly mark oneself the black sheep of the herd. To better understand this process, I interviewed sixteen self-identified atheists to obtain their religious and irreligious histories. I used a non-probability snow-ball sampling technique to find participants for my interviews. I recorded each interview and later coded and analyzed the data in search of consistent patterns in the participants' responses. In the end, I was able to identify five phases in the atheist de-conversion process: Detachment, Doubt, Dissociation, Transition, and Declaration. This theory of de-conversion focuses not only on religious belief, but on the development of an identity, elaborating on a process that is little understood and more commonly occurring in today's society. Most simply accept the normative theistic identity, yet atheists must undergo a lengthy de-conversion process before they are to reject the cherished beliefs of the American people and accept an identity that has received no validation in American society.

## INTRODUCTION

An atheist is someone who rejects the central tenets of theism, specifically someone who does not believe in the existence of a god or gods (Cliteur 2009). The number of atheists in America is on the rise (Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2009). Roughly five percent of Americans--over 15 million individuals--do not believe in God (Zuckerman 2009). Still, the United States remains a highly religious society, relative to other industrialized nations (Roof and Landres 1997; Smith 2011). Atheism is not only a prevalent but a highly stigmatized element in American society. Atheists defy the norm, which is to be 'religious,' to some extent, particularly to affirm a belief in God (Fitzgerald 2003). In God we trust, right? Or at least that is what is written on the back of our currency. From state constitutions excluding atheists from holding public office to divorced parents being denied custody of their children on account of their disbelief (Zuckerman 2009), atheists have paid the price for possessing "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman 1963:3).

Despite having been labeled the "most hated minority in America" (Foust 2009:1), atheists have received little attention in sociological literature. The majority of research within the sociology of religion has focused on believers (Bainbridge 2005; Fitzgerald 2003; Foust 2009). When non-belief is addressed, researchers tend to group atheists into the broader category of religious "nones," meaning those with no religious preference. But to group atheists with agnostics, apostates, the unchurched, the indifferent, and the alienated is to depreciate the great diversity of this group (Bainbridge 2005). Atheists have been denied a voice within sociological literature, and as such, our knowledge of atheists is limited and superficial. To compensate for such shortcomings, I focus my research on the stigmatized and marginalized minority of American atheists. As the atheist identity is generally achieved, rather than ascribed, I must ask the question: How does one become an atheist? Or what is involved in the de-conversion process that allows one to adopt the atheist identity? Rejecting the fundamental tenets of theism, particularly in the context of the highly religious American culture, cannot be a simple task or an impulsive decision. Research would indicate that adopting an identity, such as the atheist identity, is a process. One does not simply become an atheist on a whim. To do so is to willingly and knowingly mark oneself the black sheep of the herd.

## **AN EXPLORATION OF ROLE-EXIT, DEFECTION, AND DE-CONVERSION**

Very few Americans today are raised as atheists (Fitzgerald 2003); generally, these individuals must exit the role of theist prior to adopting the role of a non-believer. As such, an examination of the process of role-exit is relevant to the study of de-conversion. Ebaugh (1988) explores the general process of role-exit as it was experienced by people leaving a wide variety of roles, all of which were deemed central to their self-concept. Roles are patterned sets of behaviors assigned to individual actors occupying particular social positions or statuses (Ebaugh 1988). Ebaugh defines role-exit as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the reestablishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role” (1988:1). Ebaugh interviews one hundred and eighty-five individuals over the course of several years, finding all participants using a snow-ball sampling technique. The participants include ex-doctors, widows, ex-nuns, mothers without custody, transsexuals, and ex-convicts, among others. A pattern of role-exit emerges, with four distinct stages. The first stage is termed ‘first doubts,’ in which an individual begins to question their role commitment. The individual first experiences general dissatisfaction with their present role; after some time, they are able to identify what it is that they find so displeasing or discomforting. The person then interprets subsequent events in such a way that they are able to solidify and justify any doubts they may have had. In the second stage of the role-exit process, the individual admits dissatisfaction in their role and seeks out and evaluates alternatives. The individual then comes to the third stage, termed the ‘turning point,’ in which the individual realizes that they cannot continue to occupy their current role; they make the definitive decision to exit and pursue alternatives. The fourth and final stage of the exit process involves creating and adapting to an ex-role (Ebaugh 1988).

While the process of role-exit is relevant to this study, it is a general process not specific to religious roles. Of greatest significance and relevance to this study are the social processes concerning religious involvement and affiliation, specifically defection and de-conversion. The terms defection and de-conversion are often applied to individuals involved in the role-exit process who abandon the role of theist in favor of adopting the role of an atheist.

Although Mauss (1969) does not study the de-conversion process in its entirety, his exploration of religious defection captures similar themes concerning the individual’s relation to religion. Mauss theorizes that there are three dimensions of religious defection: the social dimension, the intellectual dimension, and the emotional dimension. Mauss defines defection as “the withdrawal from fellowship or activity by church members who have some history of regular attendance and involvement in the church” (Mauss 1969: 128). One who experiences the social dimension of defection may have encountered weakened social ties within their religious community or an unsatisfying social experience within the church. The intellectual dimension involves disbelief of certain central tenets of a religion and a belief in a secular doctrine. Emotional defection may be indicative of earlier childhood trauma, the guilt or shame associated with disobeying biblical law, or an emotionally deprived family environment. Mauss’s theory is informed by several years of participant observation at the parish level of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints and further substantiated by a quantitative study of Mormon defectors in the East Bay Area of California. While the results cannot be generalized to the entire U.S. population, the study provides modest support for Mauss’s theory of religious defection. The study would indicate that with each additional dimension of defection, the individual is less likely to attend religious services (Mauss 1969). Assuming Mauss’s theory of defection is valid, atheists will experience all three dimensions of defection within their de-conversion process. Yet while most atheists no longer participate in religious activities within the church, not all former church-goers later identify as atheists. Defection is but one aspect of the larger process of de-conversion for an atheist.

Two studies on the topic of de-conversion have served as the basis for this research. Fitzgerald (2003), for one, interviews thirty-six individuals who either identify as atheists or fit the definition of atheist but do not label themselves as such, for whatever reason. A non-probability snow-ball sampling technique is used to identify participants. Fitzgerald concludes that atheists follow a three-stage ‘career path’ into their atheist identity. Phase one begins with the individual questioning one particular religion, or the religion they are most familiar with. Throughout phase two, the individual begins “to doubt the significance, the legitimacy, and intentions of organized religion ending in the rejection of religion in general” (Fitzgerald 2003: 89). Finally, the individual begins to question the existence of God in the third phase of their de-conversion. Here, Fitzgerald focuses on the transformation of religious belief during the de-conversion process, not the individual’s more general relation to religion and to a religious identity (Fitzgerald 2003).

Smith (2011), on the other hand, studies the de-conversion process in its entirety and in even greater detail, from the individual’s earlier experiences with religion to their later acceptance of an atheistic identity. Identity will here be defined as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership in a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that group membership” (Tajfel 1981, p. 255). Smith (2011) identifies four basic elements involved in the process of claiming the atheist

identity: the ubiquity of theism, questioning theism, rejecting theism, and coming out atheist. Smith draws upon data collected from participant observation and forty individual in-depth interviews with atheists in Colorado. The ubiquity of theism concerns the pervasiveness of religious belief in American culture. Religious belief and practice often characterize the individual's life at some point. Even those who were not raised in a particular faith cannot avoid religious socialization altogether. Throughout the second phase, an individual questions the existence of God, first experiencing "a generalized and nondescript discontent with their religious beliefs" (p.223). In time, they are able to identify, substantiate, and express these doubts. Subsequently, the individual rejects theistic belief; a secular worldview is adopted to take its place. Finally, they are able to 'come out' as an atheist, validating their identity in social interaction (Smith 2011).

While the research of Fitzgerald (2003) and Smith (2011) provides much needed insight into this social process of de-conversion, it is painfully clear that we have just scratched the surface. The amount of research on the topic of de-conversion is vastly underwhelming (Ebaugh 1988). While a small number of researchers have explored factors that may give rise to religious apostasy (Hunsberger 1983; Hunsberger 1980), the social process itself is rarely the focus of sociological research. And in regard to de-conversion ending in the rejection of a religious identity altogether, Fitzgerald (2003) and Smith (2011) are the only two researchers, to my knowledge, to explore this uncharted territory. One certainly cannot hope to fully understand the dynamics of de-conversion with this limited supply of information, particularly when the research of one (Fitzgerald 2003) deals only with the loss of belief involved in this process. Only Smith (2011) explores the de-conversion process as it relates to identity transformation, noting the individual's prior commitment to a theistic identity and their later acceptance of an atheistic identity. My task is to confirm these previous findings and build upon this basic foundation. While the questioning of religious belief is central to the de-conversion process, it is but one element in the transformation of religious identity. The primary focus of this research lies not in belief, but in the individual's larger relation to religion and to religious identity.

## **INTERVIEWING ATHEISTS**

To better understand the atheist de-conversion process, I interviewed self-identified atheists to obtain their religious and irreligious histories. I used a non-probability snow-ball sampling technique to find participants for my interviews. All participants were students at a comprehensive public Midwest University, between the ages of eighteen and twenty-two. Nine were female, while the other seven were male. The vast majority of participants were Caucasian, representative of a student population with little racial and ethnic diversity. Initial participants recruited future participants from their group of friends and/or acquaintances. This type of sampling method is typically used when the population in question is particularly difficult to reach, "often due to their hesitance to be identified, or because they represent a small percent of the population" (Fitzgerald 2003:44), which I found to be the case with atheists. I did not simply interview members of the local Secular Student Society, for I believed that I could find a greater diversity in my participants if I was to employ the snow-ball method of sampling.

Prior to the start of each interview, I disclosed my own atheist identity, so the participants would feel comfortable in discussing their personal opinions and beliefs. Participants were informed of the purpose of the interviews and were asked to give their consent, with the knowledge that their participation would be kept strictly confidential. Participants were then asked a series of pre-determined questions; open-ended questions were often posed, allowing the participants to narrate their own stories. The interviews were semi-structured, allowing for a small degree of flexibility, to ask unexpected questions and/or seek clarification or further explanation (Fitzgerald 2003). When a participant drew to my attention a key element in their de-conversion, I was able to pursue new lines of questioning. I was then able to introduce the same topic in subsequent interviews in order to obtain additional information.

Participants answered questions regarding their religious upbringing so that I could better understand their overall investment in a religious identity in the earlier years of their life. They were asked to discuss their relation to their religious community and their experiences with religious belief and practice both within and outside of the church. Participants were then asked questions regarding their de-conversion, including such topics as: their initial doubts, events that prompted them to leave their faith, their emotional state throughout the process, etc.

The interviews lasted approximately one hour and were held on campus. The space for interviews was arranged in advance, so it was comfortable for both the participant and myself and suitable for an interview. Each interview was recorded and later transcribed, then coded and analyzed in search of consistent patterns in the participants' responses. I interviewed sixteen participants over the course of the spring semester. Each person was assigned a pseudonym to protect his or her identity.

## FINDINGS

I have identified five phases of the de-conversion process that allow an individual to claim the atheist identity: Detachment, Doubt, Dissociation, Transition, and Declaration. While the duration of each phase may differ, the vast majority of participants progressed through the phases in this sequential order. This particular theory focuses not only on religious belief, but on the development of an identity, elaborating on a process that is little understood and more commonly occurring in today's society.

### *Detachment*

In the phase of Detachment, the individual may experience two symptoms. First and foremost the individual is not emotionally invested in a religious identity. A good number of participants claimed that they never accepted or believed in religious teachings. At the time, they were unable to justify their skepticism or identify specific doubts they had regarding religious belief. While many identified with the religion of their parents, the title was nothing more than superficial. Terri is one such individual. Here she describes her relation to religious belief as a child:

For as long as I can remember, it's never made any sense to me. I remember being pretty little, maybe like 10, 9, that sort of thing, and sitting in church and just thinking that this is really lame and I don't believe any of this...it just didn't make any sense to me. I liked some of the stories, they were about good people, but I just was so skeptical about it. Somehow, it just never clicked with me.

Terri later reiterates:

It just doesn't make any sense in my head. Because when I was younger, I hadn't read about atheism or anti-theism, I hadn't even read things on theism, but I just went with my gut and what I felt what was right, and I never felt that there was anything out there. It just doesn't work, in my mind.

Those who did accept religious belief, including the existence of a god, became generally dissatisfied with and/or uncomfortable in their religious identity. They, however, were better able to account for their dissatisfaction. Still, their doubts were altogether limited and nonspecific. Victoria is one such atheist. She recalls: "When I was young, I definitely believed in God. I was Lutheran. When I was in confirmation in 8th grade, I remember thinking that this is my whole life and that I have to live for God, everything I do." However, Victoria later became less comfortable in her religious identity and in a religious environment: "I didn't really know I was an atheist, but I knew that I didn't like my church and that I wasn't sure of my church, of what they were preaching. It just didn't feel right." Victoria cites the conservative views of her church as the source of her discomfort, for her pastor made it clear that he believed homosexuality to be a sin. As two of Victoria's relatives are gay, she was disturbed by the statement and grew uncomfortable in an environment she believed promoted intolerance. In the end, she could no longer emotionally invest in her religious identity.

It is clear that this phase is largely rooted in emotion. In the phase of Detachment, these individuals cannot fully articulate their position as a nonbeliever or even a skeptic, and their secular worldview is surely far from developed. They are simply detached from religious belief.

A further indicator of detachment is found in their relation to their religious community or congregation. Most participants indicated that they were never closely tied to their religious community, and as such they did not feel obligated to stay involved with the church or to stand by their religious beliefs and practices. Such was the case with Brandon:

I was always a kid when I went to church and none of the kids that went there I really liked at all, because all my friends either went to their own churches or didn't go to church. So I didn't really have a lot of friends there and I was never there during my adult life at all. So I never really had a connection to the community...I suppose that made it easier to leave too.

Others were alienated from a religious community they once felt closely tied to.

Mandy, who was once heavily involved in church, faced such an experience: "Well my mother suffers from mental illness.... and the church community became less accepting of her." It was a highly negative experience for Mandy and her family, and one that truly alienated her from the church.

Whether ties to their religious community were weak or nonexistent from the start or whether they were severed after an unpleasant experience, the individual is, at some point, detached from their religious community. Between the lack of emotional investment in a religious identity and the weak social and emotional ties to their religious community, there is little to prevent these individuals from questioning the validity of religious belief and practice.

### Doubt

In the second phase of the de-conversion process, the Doubting phase, the individual specifies that which makes them uncomfortable in, or dissatisfied with, a religious identity. While their doubts may have been vague and nonspecific at first, they are now able to clearly identify and articulate why it is that they are skeptical. The individual is now able to point to specific events in their life or to information that they have obtained that they interpret as validating and justifying their skepticism. Terri, for instance, was able to do just that. She recalls:

The argument from evil is the best argument against the existence of the Christian- defined God. I took Philosophy of Religion and we literally talked about it for two weeks, and you can't dispute it.... Just the fact that God is supposed to be omnipotent, omni-benevolent, and omniscient, and he can't be all of those things at the same time and have there still be evil and suffering in the world...So the definition of the Christian God....doesn't work logically, which is awesome, because I always sort of felt like the way Christians described God didn't make any sense to me, but I didn't really know why for a long time, but then I started hearing that argument and other ones, and it just made a lot more sense. Yeah, that's an actual contradiction, something tangible that I can hold onto. Yeah, this is why this doesn't make any sense. There's an argument out there that survived for thousands of years and there's a reason why.

In time, these individuals are able to further substantiate their skepticism. They often do so through independent research or through interacting with other like-minded individuals. Their doubts grow in number and in variety as they look to distance themselves from their previously held religious beliefs.

The most frequently cited sources of doubt are listed as follows: lack of scientific evidence, the conservative views of religious institutions, the role of religion in breeding and justifying intolerance, and the Bible as a imperfect and antiquated text. The vast majority of participants cited the lack of scientific evidence supporting religious teachings as a great source a doubt. Mandy, for instance, was bothered by the lack of "sufficient evidence to prove the existence of a deity or deities." Brandon recalls:

I've always been a strong supporter of science. I've always loved science. And I realized that what they taught me in school didn't line up with the teachings of the church. So I suppose I decided one of them had to be wrong. And I suppose I picked the one that made more sense to me.

Aaron's doubts were affirmed in his scientific studies:

Studying the universe on a really fundamental level leads you to realize that everything is conceptually unified; everything makes sense down to a sub-atomic level. It all behaves according to universal constants and mathematical formulas...So when you understand this, you can, piece by piece, put it all together up to a level that you're living at. There's less mystery involved in everything and you generally see that you can operate without faith. The universe works on its own. So the choice is clear, to abandon faith and live a reason-based life.

Participants came to prefer a scientific approach to interpreting the world, as opposed to a worldview based in religious belief.

Many participants also believed religion justified and bred intolerance. And for this, religious individuals were often seen as hypocrites, incapable of loving their neighbor. Kelly, for one, finds that many "use it [religion] to demean people or treat people horribly." Kayla too shares this thought: "They're just, self-proclaimed religious individuals that is, can be so close-minded and so un-accepting of people. You know, they say they're Christians, and they say they follow in the path of Christ or whatever, but they're so...they're just mean." Lily finds religion is often used as justification for intolerance and bigotry: "I've heard some negative comments from people, sometimes because of religion or they've made their views clear and they've said it's because of religion that they're homophobic." These atheists questioned whether religion truly served a greater purpose, or whether religion was simply a destructive force in society.

The conservative views of the church were the third most cited source of doubt. These individuals could not support the views of the church on social and political matters. For instance, Natalie's respect for the church was greatly diminished as she learned of their views on homosexuality:

And my earliest memory of thinking, "Wait, maybe this is all bullshit," was when I was reading some story in *Newsweek* about Don't Ask Don't Tell. I was in fifth grade and again, going to a Catholic school, I just knew that was a taboo kind of subject. And I remember reading about it and reading these religious arguments, and I was like, "The Bible actually says that?" And then I actually started reading the Bible, and I couldn't understand it. There was no reason for it, for discriminating against gay people.

Natalie came to see the church as intolerant and small-minded, as did a number of participants. She could not respect such an institution that would argue in favor of discriminating against a certain group of people. Kayla, too, opposed the conservative views of the church: "The whole birth control issue and abortion issue, I just think they are

ridiculous. I just think that they are trying to push control over our bodies and they shouldn't." Margaret found her church prescribed rigid and traditional gender roles:

When I was a kid I know we changed churches because our first church didn't allow women to do anything for the church, volunteer-wise, except for cooking and cleaning. My mom is an artist and she wanted to do a mural for the kid's area, and they wouldn't let her do that. And so I just always thought that was kind of messed up.

Kayla and Margaret were disturbed by the fact that their church would not advocate in favor of women's rights. They not only lost respect for their church, but they questioned the authority and infallibility of the Church and of all religious institutions, as did the other participants.

Ironically enough, a common source of doubt for these atheists was the Bible itself. Many found the Bible to be a flawed, antiquated text, and a product of mankind, not of God. Adam questioned the credibility of this sacred text:

It seemed silly. It seemed like these Biblical stories would be nice if they were true, and kind of fun, but...you really think that the guy got swallowed by a whale? Really? (Laughs) And you think that he lived? Or you really think that a guy was wandering in the desert for forty years with no direction whatsoever, and managed to live? Or that people were living to be 900 years old? No. That doesn't make any sense. That's stupid (laughs). I just thought the whole thing was silly. I thought it was ridiculous.

Kayla too had trouble accepting biblical stories as plausible. What's more, she found that a number of atrocities were committed in the Bible at the hand of God or in the name of God. She recalls: "I began to question the miracles that happened in the Bible and I began to realize that some of the things in the Bible were really, really horrible." In the end, Kayla could no longer accept the Bible as a credible source of information or even a good source of morals. Margaret took issue with the Bible in that she felt it was inappropriate to live by biblical teachings: "It's like taking an old view and trying to put it on the modern world." Such participants came to reject most, if not all, biblical teachings.

These individuals cited other sources of doubt as well, including, but not limited to, the role of religion in world history, the idea that free-thought was discouraged in religious institutions, and the notion that one religion could have all the answers and be privy to the secret workings of the universe.

At first, these individuals questioned the beliefs and practices of the religion with which they were most familiar, which was, in every case, Christianity. However, they quickly began to question the legitimacy of all organized religion, until they were led to question the very existence of a god. In the end, the participants of this study could not find answers to satisfy their skepticism. Adam points out: "I was not ever satisfied with the answer 'because God did it.' And unfortunately Sunday school teachers are not theologians, so they weren't able to give me an answer." As they were unable to appease their doubt, they turned to individuals who could support and reinforce their skepticism.

It is clear that this phase is largely rooted in logic and reason, as opposed to emotion. By the end of the Doubting phase of de-conversion, the individual is better able to articulate their position as a skeptic and to substantiate their doubts. The general sense of dissatisfaction in the phase of Detachment is replaced with the confidence that they do not belong in their previously held religious identity. Their secular worldview begins to develop as they move into the phase of Dissociation.

### *Dissociation*

Within the third phase of the de-conversion process, the individual dissociates themselves from their former religious identity. They reject the beliefs and practices of the religion they were most familiar with. Brandon dismissed his religious teachings shortly after being confirmed: "As soon as I stopped going to church, I said, 'I can't believe I believed that stuff' ...once it stopped being pounded into my head." Much like Brandon, the other participants had no interest in religious services, prayer, Bible study, or any other tradition or activity associated with their former identity. Terri, for one, stopped attending church services at the age of fifteen. She recalls, "I just couldn't take it anymore." Jesse turned from his religious identity at an even younger age, after his mother presented him with the option to discontinue his involvement with the church. He recalls, "I guess after I was done with confirmation classes, I just decided that it wasn't for me and I haven't looked back." By the age of eighteen, Kayla too had no interest in church participation:

After I went to college, I wouldn't spend whole weekends with my dad anymore, so I wouldn't be there on Sunday mornings, so I wouldn't have to go to church.... I had been questioning it for years before that, but I had just kind of been doing what they wanted me to, going to church and whatnot, but not never really believing or anything. But when I stopped all that, I was free to question, go the other direction. I guess it

started right after high school, turning away from Catholicism, because I had the freedom to, and I wasn't constantly surrounded by my family.

Like many others, Kayla was better able to dissociate herself from her religious identity after leaving the household in which she learned to adopt that identity. In the college environment, she felt less pressure to hold onto an identity she was no longer content or comfortable with. She was able to distance herself from that identity and seek out an alternative.

The participants were no longer able to think of themselves in terms of their previously held religious identity. Still, most participants did not adopt their atheist identity straightaway; after having occupied a widely accepted and respected identity, the thought of adopting what is perhaps one of the most deviant identities in American society was near incomprehensible. Before they could consider adopting an atheistic identity, the participants first had to pass through the phase of Transition.

### *Transition*

In the fourth phase of the de-conversion process, the individual tries on an alternative identity, one that bridges the gap between a theistic identity and an atheistic one. These are polar opposite identities, after all. The transitional phase can help to ease the individual into their new identity. As Brandon points out: "At least in my experience, talking to people...there has to be some sort of conversion period where they kind of do a light version of what they believed, before they finally decide to throw it all away." Often the participants were hesitant to claim their atheist identity, to renounce their faith and defy the normative expectations of American society. They may have wished to avoid the negative labeling that comes with adopting an atheist identity. Mandy, for one, identified as agnostic for she believed the term was less laden with negative connotations: "I think a lot of people use that term just because it sounds...nicer. It's an easier term to use. I think that's partially why I did it." Other participants were not yet sure of what they believed. One participant looks back on her transitional phase:

I used to consider myself an agnostic...And I think for the most part, I only said I was agnostic because I thought the word atheist was a little bit too strict for what I thought at the time, because I didn't know what I thought at the time...I think I was agnostic for middle school and maybe the first year of high school, just because I didn't want to acknowledge what I thought one way or the other. I was pretty sure I didn't believe in god or anything, at least I didn't believe in what Christianity defined God to be. That really, really didn't make any sense...So I was agnostic for a while.

Her exposure to other nonreligious individuals ended her transitional phase: "I met a few people who identified as atheist or agnostic, and I just thought I was lying to myself. I am an atheist. I might as well just say I am an atheist."

The participants sought out a belief system or a philosophy that was not characterized by the faults they found with their former religious beliefs. Adam, who did not have faith in a higher power, took an interest in Buddhism: "The only reason I went for Buddhism was because there was no god...It was just like trying on a new philosophy of life." Darla, who believed Catholicism was a fear-based religion, turned to Buddhism: "I felt like Buddhism just came away from that, the guilt and fear, and made more sense for me, at the time."

But of course, the transitional phase came to an end, as the participants realized they were better suited for another identity.

### *Declaration*

In the end, these individuals could no longer adhere to religious belief or practice of any kind. They renounced their faith in favor of a secular worldview. Ultimately, they recognized that they no longer believed in a higher power. They found a suitable identity that characterized their beliefs, or lack thereof. Margaret claims: "Eventually I just thought, 'This is what makes sense to me.'" The participants then disclosed their identity to others, often significant others, finalizing their decision. Adam recalls: "I was in high school when I finally felt comfortable enough...it felt like I could be open about it, you know...that's when I really started to come out and say, 'I'm an atheist. I don't believe in God. If you don't like it, that's fine.'" Terri made quite the public announcement: "One day I was just decided I was lying to myself by calling myself agnostic. I'm just an atheist, and I put it on my Facebook and there it was." As Smith (2011) points out, "it is only until the label is voluntarily applied in concrete social interaction that it takes on its full social significance" (p.229), with the ability to shape their experiences within the social world.

Reactions to the disclosure were mixed. Some met with a rather positive reaction, as did Robert: "When I told my parents, my mom said 'Welcome to the family,' because she's also an atheist." On the other hand, some met with intolerance, shock, or disappointment. Kayla recalls: "At one point I said I was an atheist and my father said 'Oh, I'm sorry we didn't raise you properly.'" Yet, all in all, the participants found their de-conversion experience to be a positive one. Aaron claims that the experience was "kind of enlightening." For Kayla, claiming her atheist

identity was “kind of a weight off my shoulders. Like I wasn’t trying to fake anything...I was proud of myself for thinking, thinking critically and not being afraid to deny something that so many other people believe in.”

It took quite some time for the participants to reach this point. One does not simply decide, in the spur of the moment, that God does not exist. It takes time to undo years of religious socialization and come to such a conclusion. Natalie admits: “It was a long process of de-conversion.” Mandy points out that that she did not come to this conclusion over night: “I don’t think I really had one big atheist moment or one big realization. It was just the gradual knowledge that I don’t really believe in any deities.” Though the process was lengthy, the participants found the journey to be entirely worthwhile.

## DISCUSSION

Without question, the atheist identity is not an ascribed status, but one that is achieved. None of the participants in this study were raised as atheists. Though few were raised in a secular household, the vast majority were raised in a religious identity, with at least minimal adherence to the customs and practices of a belief system, including involvement in a religious institution. Even those who were raised in families without commitment to religious belief or practice could not possibly avoid religious socialization altogether. The pervasive influence of religion on American culture is unmistakable; it is everywhere, from the “God bless you” we hear after sneezing in public, to the sign staked in our neighbor’s yard that reads “Keep Christ in Christmas.” Outside of the family, one certainly will be “influenced by the high levels of religiosity and belief present in the general milieu of American culture” (Smith 2011: 221). Today, most simply accept the normative theistic identity, yet atheists must undergo a lengthy de-conversion process before they are to reject the cherished beliefs of the American people and accept an identity that has received no validation in American society.

This study identifies five phases of the atheist de-conversion process: Detachment, Doubt, Dissociation, Transition, and Declaration. The vast majority of participants conformed to this model of de-conversion. Within the phase of Detachment, the individual becomes emotionally detached from their religious identity and encounters weakened social and emotional ties to their religious community. In the phase of Doubt, the individual is able to identify that which makes them dissatisfied with a religious identity. The individual then discards their former religious identity in the phase of Dissociation; they can no longer think of themselves as a member of that particular social group. Before the individual is able to claim the atheist identity, they must pass through the Transitional phase, where they try on an alternative identity, one that serves as a stepping stone on the road to atheism. In the end, the individual’s life can no longer be characterized by religious belief or practice of any kind. They commit themselves to a secular worldview and reject the existence of a higher power. The de-conversion process is complete as the individual validates their atheist identity in social interaction. In time, their atheist identity becomes central to their self-concept. In this identity, they are able to locate themselves within the social landscape of American society. They establish symbolic boundaries and reform their interpretive frameworks around this identity, which in turn guides and shapes their experiences within the social world.

Through this research, I was able to expand upon our existing knowledge and provide a more thorough and detailed account of the atheist de-conversion process. The model Fitzgerald (2003) presents, though useful, is overly simplistic; it focuses too heavily on the beliefs involved, neglecting any mention of identity transformation. Smith’s (2011) study of the atheist de-conversion process, though more detailed, fails to take into account the individual’s past emotional investment in religious belief and former relation to a religious community. What’s more, he fails to take note of the identity that serves to bridge the gap between theism and atheism. The model I have presented corrects for these mistakes and builds upon this very basic knowledge we have of the atheist de-conversion process. For those interested in the social dynamics of disbelief, our understanding of the atheist de-conversion process is far from complete. Hopefully, this research may strengthen our understanding of this complex, and often challenging, journey that one must take in order to claim their atheist identity.

### *Future Research*

Future research should validate these findings, drawing upon a larger sample population to attain greater reliability in the results. Additionally, there are a number of influences and factors that aid in the individual’s de-conversion, and though I did not address those factors here, such a topic warrants further investigation.

Beyond that, there are a number of opportunities for future research, as atheists have received little attention in sociological literature. I do believe that the study of identity management is of great importance. We know very little of how it is that atheists manage their identity. Certainly, the management of a stigmatized identity can be no easy task. The expectations of fulfilling the norm of possessing a religious identity or having religious belief cast “some kind of shadow on the encounters encountered everywhere in daily life” (Goffman 1963: 129). In each and every instance, the atheist must ask himself, “to tell or not to tell...to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to



whom, how, when, and where?" (ibid.: 45). What's more, atheists must always be cognizant of the broader social context in which the disclosure takes place, for they live in such a society where their identity has been marginalized and deeply stigmatized. Undoubtedly, much research is needed to strengthen our understanding of what it means to live as the "most hated minority" in American society (Foust 2009:1)

## REFERENCES

- Bainbridge, William Sims. 2005. "Atheism." *Interdisciplinary Journal of Research on Religion* 1. Retrieved August 12, 2010 (<http://www.religjournal.com/pdf/ijrr01002.pdf>).
- Cliteur, Paul. 2009. "The Definition of Atheism." *Journal of Religion and Society* 11. Retrieved July 10th, 2011 (<http://moses.creighton.edu/JRS/2009/2009-4.pdf>).
- Ebaugh, Helen R. F. 1988. *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Fitzgerald, Bridget Ann. 2003. "Atheists in the United States: The Construction and Negotiation of a Nonnormative Identity." Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Sociology, State University of New York at Albany, Albany, NY.
- Foust, Christina H. 2009. "An Alien in a Christian World: Intolerance, Coping, and Negotiating Identity Among Atheists in the United States." Master's Thesis, Department of Religion, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC.
- Goffman, Erving. 1963. *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall.
- Hunsberger, Bruce. 1983. "Apostasy: A Social Learning Perspective." *Review of Religious Research* 25(1): 21-38.
- Hunsberger, Bruce. 1980. "A Re-examination of the Antecedents of Apostasy." *Review of Religious Research* 21(2): 158-170.
- Mauss, Armand L. 1969. "Dimensions of Religious Defection." *Review of Religious Research* 10(3): 128-135.
- Roof, Wade Clark and J. Shawn Landres. 1997. "Defection, Disengagement, and Dissent: The Dynamics of Religious Change in the United States." *Religion and the Social Order* 7: 77-95.
- Smith, Jesse M. 2011. "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism." *Sociology of Religion* 72(2): 215-237.
- Tajfel, Henri. 1981. *Human Groups and Social Categories: Studies in Social Psychology*. Cambridge, Great Britain: Cambridge University Press.
- Zuckerman, Phil. 2009. "Atheism, Secularity, and Well-Being: How Findings of Social Science Counter Negative Stereotypes and Assumptions." *Sociology Compass* 3(6): 949-971.