

Ritualistic Communication in the Atheist and Agnostic Community

Abstract

This paper examines ritualistic communication in the context of atheist and agnostic communities, both physical and virtual. A number of rituals, some that parallel those in religious groups, are summarized, including the rituals of conversion, negation, science and reason, community, non-structure, humanism and freedom, and morality. In this paper, we problematize the discursively created binary between religious and irreligious, in an effort to articulate potential common ground between these groups.

Ritualistic Communication in the Atheist and Agnostic Community

“Agnosticism is also faith – faith in the creative process.” (Strem, 1986, p. 155)

From the beginning of human communication, the truthfulness of religious claims has been hotly debated by believers and non-believers. In the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul is recorded to have traveled to Athens. There, he debates with Epicureans and Stoics, individuals subscribing to non-theistic philosophies.

Men of Athens, I perceive that in all things you are very religious; for as I was passing through and considering the objects of your worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO THE UNKNOWN GOD. Therefore, the one whom you worship without knowing, Him I proclaim to you. (Acts 17:22-23; New King James Version)

Paul complicates the binary between believers and non-believers, religious and irreligious, theists and atheists. This paper will examine the communication practices of the atheist/agnostic community, and the presence (or absence) of division between those having faith in a god(s) and those having faith in an “alternative tradition” (Thrower, 1980).

The rejection of religious worldviews, dating back to ancient India, Greece, and China, is not a recent phenomenon. A segment of the philosophical population within each tradition critiqued traditional polytheism and mythico-religious ways of examining reality associated with personalized, supernatural deities (Thrower, 1980). However, it was not until the end of the medieval marriage of Church and State in the 14th and 15th centuries that openly agnostic and atheistic attitudes were permitted to be expressed in Europe (Thrower, 2000). Then, during the 19th century, European philosophers brought rejection of religion to the limelight, advocating the material world as the sole location where humanity might find, even if only temporarily, fulfillment (Thrower, 1980). The influence of Marxist thought proliferated a naturalistic

worldview, and the possibility of a revolutionary, humanistic transformation of society. Prior to Marx, societal transformation and true fulfillment were constructed primarily as the result of divine intervention. A major atheist critique was that religion alone was the source of the world's evils, such as the Spanish inquisition. The rationale was that wherever religion exercised power; oppression, corruption, and violence subsequently followed as means to enforcing ideological agendas. Atheists argued that the elimination of religion would end tyranny (McGrath, 2004). In the 19th century, atheism began to enjoy power and influence previously dominated by religious institutions, particularly in the form of the Soviet Union in the 20th century. However, Stalin's regime was as murderous as his religious predecessors, and thus challenged atheists' claim of innocence (McGrath, 2004). After the Soviet Union collapsed, religious communities in Eastern Europe and Western Asia were flooded by individuals who had previously abandoned them. Islam and orthodoxy particularly experienced resurgence in this geographical territory (McGrath, 2004).

Historians (e.g. McGrath, 2004) have argued that while atheism is the ideal religion of Enlightenment-modernity, it has been somewhat deficient in responding to the development of postmodernity, and the implications for its future. Nevertheless, atheist scholars are confident that the "free thinking" position can regain some of its lost ground, not as a manifestation of public philosophy, but as a private belief system. Through individualistic means, the atheist community seeks to usher in a new position of adherents and privileged access to the corridors of power respectful of, and not condescending of, others' beliefs (McGrath, 2004). Non-believers avow that religion is a purely human creation, discursively produced and reproduced by ecclesiastical rhetoricians. In this conceptualization, the religious believer is ignorant of the Objective Truth, beguiled by religious rhetoric. Although the unbelievers' access to mass media

has been somewhat limited, the atheist community believes that religion could be abolished if religious rhetoric could be deconstructed. Denied many forms of self-empowerment, the atheist community has endured by passing out handbills, lecturing in city parks, meeting in groups, and shrugging off obstacles and setbacks (Hart, 1978).

Although atheists as a group share no common sub-cultural heritage with other marginalized groups, (e.g., members of the early civil rights movement; Hart, 1978), there are a number of beliefs that unite and divide atheists and agnostics. The “alternative tradition,” comprised of these two groups, operates in contradistinction to the overwhelmingly predominate religious tradition. They both posit naturalism, which constitutes that meaning is to be found within this life, and not in the various forms of afterlife, which lies at the crux of the dissension between religious and non-religious constructions of reality. Neither the atheist, nor the agnostic, lives in terror of Hell, nor in anticipation of Heaven, but enacts immortality through everyday moments (Strem, 1986). Adherents to the alternative tradition believe that understanding of the world and humanity, without reference to religion, will come to fruition in the near future (Thrower, 1980).

The fundamental difference between the atheist and the agnostic is that the agnostic does not deny, nor doubt the existence of God, but declares Him to be unknowable, an esoteric concept beyond human intelligence. Declaring God does not exist is just as inane for the agnostic as the attitude of the religious adherent who knows God personally (Strem, 1986). Unbelievers consider it their inalienable right to question, seeking to test the validity of truth claims (Strem, 1986). As such, they devote their lives to combating forces that restrict human freedom. While it is important to denote the diversity of viewpoints between the atheist and agnostic, it is equally significant to extrapolate the similarity between these two groups.

Atheist discourse rhetorically depends on its opposite, determined by religion, not irreligion, in the constitution of its field of argument (Hart, 1978). Hart (1978) found that atheist rhetoric is more often reactive to religious communication, as opposed to proactively creating messages. Atheism, as a worldview, is a response to faith, seeking to become autonomous of religion. Atheism can only be comprehended in relation to its negation: theism (Thrower, 2000). While atheist/agnostic organizations self-identify as non-religious (e.g., American Atheists, n.d.b), a number of scholars have framed these groups in ways akin to religious paradigms (Dawson, 2000; Hedley, 1979; Mansfield, 2007; Strem, 1986; Thrower, 1980; Turner, 2002; Van Heerden, 2004). For example, Dawson (2000) argued that both theism and atheism are indefensible positions as ontological statements scientifically or philosophically. In its criticisms of theism, self-titled “free thinkers” claim to be more moral than religious groups. However, in the process of making these inexorable arguments, atheists become just as susceptible to fanaticism as the followers they criticize (Mansfield, 2007). Atheism has the tendency to fall into the same hermeneutic trap as religions (Van Heerden, 2004).

One of the alternative tradition’s main criticisms of religion is that it is based on superstition. Hedley (1979) articulates the hallmark of superstition as an unwillingness to examine the facts in a given case. He then proceeds to delineate a number of atheism’s superstitions including: The content and emphasis of religious thought does not change. Second, religion is inherently opposed to fact and reason. Third, religion is an escape mechanism. Fourth, religious people are socially unconscious. Fifth, ideals are impractical. Sixth, people with faith cannot have fun. Hedley (1979) calls “these modern unbelievers superstitious because they have chosen to fear and to avoid without ever having used their abundant opportunity to learn and to know; and that mood is the very essence of superstition” (p. 137). Atheists commit the same

error that theists do when they say, “God exists” by adamantly claiming, “God does not exist” (Turner, 2002).

The objective of this paper is not to elevate one side or the other of this eternal debate, but to complicate and problematize the boundaries between belief and unbelief. For example, atheist/agnostic groups utilize religious language in their marketing efforts. They distribute literature, such as “prayer cards,” “concordances,” and “hymnals” (Hart, 1978).

Atheism/agnosticism are related to traditional religions in their search for truth (Richardson, 2003). As Hedley (1979) articulates:

The great majority of the self-consciously irreligious are not irreligious at all. They are devout seekers of truth, so long as it is not called “religion.” They are loyal defenders of value...They use and love their own symbols, a bit naively perhaps but very sincerely.

They honestly seek the well being of man, and they work earnestly toward the making of a better world. In short, they are religious men and women. (p. 138)

This quotation is more extreme than the current authors’ stance. Our objective is not to equate atheism/agnosticism as religion, but to suggest that the two positions are not as dialogically opposed as they have been discursively constructed. Some (e.g. Hill et al., 2000) have defined religion solely in terms of a superhuman deity. But religion can and should be classified more in terms of form than content. Religious discourse consists of ritualistic communication. Religious rituals signify more than simply one’s relationship to the sacred (Emmons & Paloutzian, 2003). As such, an investigation of potential forms of ritual in the communicative practices of atheists and agnostics could illuminate further the relationship between religious and irreligious social construction. We will now explore the theoretical concept of rituals.

Rituals

Ritual is a unique type of communicative practice. It is characterized by the form of the behaviors involved and the goal of performing such behaviors. “Ritual is the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically effect or participate in the serious life” (Rothenbuhler, 1998, p. 27). The “serious life” refers to “those things treated as more important, more morally freighted, and more obligatory than others within any given context” (Rothenbuhler, 2006, p. 13). The “seriousness” can be demonstrated in big ceremonial rituals, like weddings, funerals, and baptisms, but it also applies to those less grand events in which the subtle rules and patterns of behaviors bespeak certain sociocultural norms, for example the seating arrangements in a board meeting that are taken as signs of the hierarchical order of the organization (Rothenbuhler, 2006). Therefore, the analytic category of ritual includes “both formal rites and ceremonies, set aside in special places and times and receiving special degrees of attention, and the relatively more formal elements and characteristics of otherwise ordinary, everyday activities” (Rothenbuhler, 2006, p. 14). Rituals are a reflection of ontological and epistemological assumptions (Wong, 2001). Organizational culture is constituted by the sundry rituals enacted (Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1983). These rituals function to create shared meaning in the members who perform them.

Previous research has examined ritual communication in a variety of contexts. Goffman and others have studied the rituals in everyday activities, such as facework, deference, demeanor, and politeness (1959, 1967). Goody (1972) and Coupland, Coupland, and Robinson (1992) examined the formulaic greetings such as “How are you?” and “Fine, how are you?” and the importance of this ritualistic greeting. Others have studied leave-taking, which functions like greetings, and how it maintains the social relationship between two people (Firth, 1972). Carey

(1988, 1989) focused on the media rituals in newspapers and television. As a family ritual, television viewing is a way to unite family members and boost household conversations (Lull, 1988; Morley, 1992). Television studies also have focused on media ceremonies and events, such as state funerals and political coups, that are broadcast live and often interrupt scheduled programs (Dayan & Katz, 1992). In groups, organizations, and families, identity is implicitly maintained through rituals of greeting, corporate meeting, partying, and reunion (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Knuf, 1989-1990; Sigman, 1991; Wolin & Bennett, 1984).

The study of communication as ritual signifies the ways norms and orders are reinforced. In contrast to the transmission model of communication, which emphasizes sending and transmitting information to others, the ritual definition of communication consists of sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and mutual faith (Carey, 1989). For example, in examining newspapers, a ritual view of communication would focus on how a particular worldview is represented and reinforced rather than on how the messages are sent and received. News stories do not merely disseminate new information to readers, but construct social reality (Carey, 1989), which functions to structure readers' lives. To view communicative activities as rituals is to focus on the forms and procedures of things, rather than the specific content. These forms and procedures reinforce existing beliefs and strengthen fellowship among people who perform the ritual. In summary, a ritual view of communication is concerned with the representation of shared beliefs rather than the mere act of imparting information (Carey, 1989). "The study of ritual communication requires attention to both the explicit use of communication in formal rites and ceremonies and to the often-implicit communicative consequences of the formal elements of everyday activities" (Rothenbuhler, 2006, p. 14).

Therefore, recognizing the role of ritual in the lives of groups, and its reflection of

underlying paradigmatic values, we ask the following research question:

RQ: What communicative rituals are evident in atheist/agnostic groups?

Methods

Only one in four people in the United States attend church regularly, most of whom are children (American Atheists, n.d.b). Approximately 30 million people self-identify as either atheist or agnostic (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). Around the world, 850 million people are atheist, agnostic or non-religious, which equates to more than 10% of the global population, making up the fourth largest belief group (Atheism Empire, n.d.a). Thrower (1980) concludes that within the Western hemisphere, we are now living in a post-religious age and are the first persons in history to do so (Thrower, 1980). Atheist/agnostic communities are an understudied community, perhaps reflecting ambivalence on the part of the communication discipline.

As the research question in this study asked about the presence of rituals in atheistic/agnostic groups, a qualitative approach was used to examine this community. Specifically, a combination of participant observation, face-to-face semi-structured interviews, and textual analysis were chosen for this study. Weekly student-organized atheist/agnostic club meetings are held in a large Northwestern public university, a suitable venue for participant observation. One of the researchers learned about the club from a booth they had set up on campus during "Tolerance Week." He then contacted the group through their website. All of the people who participate in this club are university students, both graduate and undergraduate, from a variety of majors. The students all self-identify as agnostic or atheist. Statistics have shown that the more educated an individual is, the less likely he/she is to self-avow as religious or to express belief in a god (Atheism Empire, n.d.a). Therefore, a club of college students

provides an opportune group by which to investigate atheist and agnostic rituals. Contrastingly, Tamney, Hopkins, and Jacovini, (1965) argued that atheists are not prone to self-organizing. This realization occurs because free-thinkers' values often prevent them from tolerating the ritualistic activities and hierarchies that develop within organizations (Demerath & Thiessen, 1966). Considering our focus on rituals, this notion enhances the heuristic value of studying a student-organized atheist/agnostic club.

We participated in the club's weekly meetings for five weeks. This is not a widely-advertised group, as the members prefer to remain under the radar. Therefore, we did not make our research purpose explicit at the first meeting we attended. Our objective was simply to develop rapport with group members. At the second meeting, as we had become more familiar with the participants, we disclosed our research purpose. We did not take notes during the meetings as it would have unnaturalistically distinguished us from the other club members. Immediately following the meetings, we recorded our observations.

In addition, we interviewed six individuals from the club, which has approximately eleven regular attendees. Based on the research question, a semi-structured interview protocol was created and revised under an expert's guidance. Face-to-face interviews were conducted, providing us with opportunities to have close contact with the club members, and to uncover the rituals manifested in their communication. Time and place for the interviews were selected according to the interviewees' convenience. Four interviews were conducted at the university's library, one in a participant's office, and one at a participant's home. Every interview lasted between 30 and 50 minutes. Before every interview, participants were asked to read and sign consent forms. Questions in the interview protocol were asked during the interview, but follow-up questions were used to probe emergent themes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed as

soon as the interviews were finished.

In addition, we chose several atheist/agnostic networking websites for textual analysis of members' posts. According to the Online Atheist Alliance (n.d.b), "Young people whose beliefs may not be accepted where they normally live and go to school will find this non-dogmatic, welcoming atmosphere a relief." It is clear that young people constitute an important part of the atheist community, and that online chatrooms and websites are an important means of facilitating esteem as unbelievers. In addition, as pointed out by Campbell (2004), the internet has provided a space for the development of new relationships, which is suitable for communication about and experience of spiritual pursuits. Online networks are an important medium for atheists and agnostics in the creation of a virtual community (Baym, 1998; Richardson, 2003).

One researcher accessed the club website for the Atheist and Agnostic Student Group, and from the hyperlinks on their page, four atheist networking sites were selected for this study, including Atheist Alliance, Atheist Empire, Centers for Inquiry on Campus, and American Atheists. Atheist Alliance was chosen because it is "the only democratic national atheist organization in the United States" (Atheist Alliance, n.d.d), as claimed by the website itself. Atheist Alliance and Atheist Empire were both used because of their abundance of information. For example, the Atheist Alliance website contains information on the organization, books and films, topics from national secular magazines, a free thought directory, and a journal of higher criticism. The Atheist Empire consists of information on atheism, news, references, quotations, multimedia, entertainment guides, links, shopping guides, and music. Finally, the American Atheists site was chosen because of its updated atheist news. Center for Inquiry On Campus provided us with an opportunity to access discussion forums full of inquiries and opinions. One member of the research team analyzed these online posts according to the research question.

Data Analysis

Utilizing a dialogic form of grounded theory, the research team deduced the salient axial codes in the data set. Through dialogue, we summarized several pertinent patterns from the data. More than ten categories emerged from the interview transcripts, online network posts, and field notes. After several rounds of constant comparison, these categories were compressed into seven. Each researcher then took a section of the data set, and the entire compilation of data was categorized according to the axial codes. The data were analyzed by multiple coders, which increased the trustworthiness of the results through researcher triangulation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Results

Although the student-run club, indicative of likeminded national organizations, are explicit in their claims that they are “not a religion,” stressing science and natural law, this study examines the veracity of these claims, and the similarity/dissimilarity between them and “religious” groups in their use of rituals, which was the research question posed. While atheism/agnosticism, by definition, is in reference to all religions, overwhelmingly Christianity was articulated as the bane of the participants’ unbelief. A number of communicative rituals were discovered, including the rituals of conversion, negation/challenge, science/rationality, community, non-structure, humanism and freedom, and moral living.

Ritual of conversion

Similar to religious believers, atheists also go through a gradual process of “conversion,” which become important narratives in the context of both physical and virtual communities. Many atheists spend significant portions of their lives as believers or regular church-goers, but as life experiences and personal studies and meditations accumulated, they came to deny the

existence of God, and thus were “converted” into unbelief. Not only did our interview participants identify their experience of “conversion,” but a myriad of similar narratives also were found on atheist websites under the title of “awakening tales.” Converted, these storytellers share a sense of excitement, as they cherish their new identity of free thinking. Some atheists started down the road of “revelation” by reading the Bible, which they describe as not making sense. They found contradictions, injustice, cruelty and violence, which led them to question the historical validity and credibility of the Bible.

Like many atheists, I went to church as a youth, but stopped when I was about 13 years of age. The reason: One hot summer day, I got bored and I read the bible front cover to back cover. To state it succinctly, I found some of the accounts it contained to be despicable, hypocritical, contradictory, and at times, just plain absurd. (Atheist Alliance, n.d.a)

A second signpost on the path to conversion is discussing/debating religious issues with believers. Many atheists tried to make sense of faith by talking with believers, but these discussions often came to unsatisfactory endings. Similar to reading the Bible, they found contradictions in the believers’ arguments, and it was these contradictions that drove them toward skepticism.

One incident that occurred in high school made me realize that I was an atheist. A history teacher was giving a lecture on the Scopes "monkey" trial and stated that she did not agree with evolution, which I did. She stated that she was Christian and totally believed the biblical account of creation. I informed her of the numerous inconsistencies contained in Genesis, and we got into a rather heated debate with her throwing her hands up in frustration and switching subjects. After class, she cornered me and asked me if I

was an Atheist. (Atheist Alliance, n.d.a)

Thirdly, attempts at religious experience are common in the conversion narratives. Having religious inclinations, many atheists searched for God during childhood. They went to church, attended Sunday school, prayed, and were involved in all kinds of church activities. However, they did not feel a spiritual response from God, an experience that would have strengthened their belief. For example, one interviewee described his experience:

When I was 12, I wanted to be baptized. One of the bishops asked me how I felt.

Well, I felt wet. I guess I was waiting for some spiritual experience, something to grab me that would let me know what I was doing was true. That didn't happen.

These conversion narratives materialize into a lifestyle of negation and challenge of religious claims, which functions as a second atheist/agnostic ritual.

Ritual of Negation/Challenge

Members of the A & A club describe atheism and agnosticism as a position of negation. Without religion, predominately used interchangeably with Christianity, atheist organizations would be unnecessary. Unlike religious communities that disseminate a “positive” set of constructed ideology, atheism and agnosticism exist by the act of negation. The communicative ritual then is to directly deny, and refute the claims made by religious groups. This negation manifests in the perpetual form of challenge. One of the central functions of A & A communities is to critique religion through argumentation. As one post urged, “Start questioning Christians in everyday situations; maybe you will get them to think...maybe” (Atheist Empire, n.d.d). This ritual is performed in the context of club discussion and organized debates with religious groups on campus. Every week group members discuss thought-provoking topics in a search for more answers. One member explained the antithesis to this ritual, “Christians already know answers,

they're just looking to enforce them.” One of the central tenets of the ritual of negation/challenge is the presupposition that to self-avow as one who has faith is to avoid asking difficult questions about reality.

Everyone who is born into [religion] buys into it and doesn't question it. If you're a rational being, you'll step away and have a moment of disbelief and assess all possibilities. When I assessed all possibilities, I find that religion is kind of absurd to me. People who are deemed religious are described as accepting views that are taught to them during childhood and never engage in deep and existential analysis of those beliefs. For if one sincerely does engage in challenging self-reflection, the ritual of negation presumes, he/she will be enlightened to their misguided perceptions of reality. According to the A & A community, people who are religious simply “lash onto” religion because it provides a sense of comfort in an uncertain world, rather than acknowledging the untruthfulness of religion. The ritual of negation encourages atheists/agnostics to challenge not only the views of “believers,” but the views non-believers hold as well.

I see the human race as looking for an answer. The best idea we have is science. I find that science is very skeptical. I'm very skeptical because I've seen things change. The modern myth today is the Big Bang theory. My whole point is to question everything. Anything that people hold as true, I challenge those things. I sound very atheist because I undermine other people's belief, but I undermine atheism as well. Just questioning any ideas people hold. If they're taught something their whole life and never questioned it, how is it sincere, factual, rational belief?

There is a significant difference in this ritual's manifestation between the physical and virtual communities. Virtual A & A communities tend to construct a stronger oppositional and

confrontational approach. While the physical community does engage in a ritual of negation with individuals of faith, the actual performance can be a quite cautious affair.

You're afraid to talk about your belief some time. You don't want to insult people either, as much as it is fun to challenge other people's beliefs. It's not polite. Well, I won't [talk about religion] aggressively, unless I feel it's a good moment for that.

The ritual of negation/challenge resonates with the ritual of science/reason.

Ritual of Invoking Science and Reason

The communicative performance of atheism/agnosticism includes the habitual invocation of science and reason. Included in this characterization is the implication that religions are expressions of emotionality, and oppositional to science, denying or ignoring facts because of blind adherence to religious tenets. Perhaps the biggest conflict between atheists/agnostics and people of faith is the debate between evolution and creation. Creationism is described as foolish, deceptive, reversing "the procedures of real science," and failing to "agree with the evidence" (American Atheists, n.d.a). Every week, the atheist and agnostic club discusses matters related to science, which fuel criticism of religious groups.

In a simple sense, it just doesn't jive with reality for me. Everything I read [in the Bible] didn't make sense with me and how I saw the world. Philosophically, historically, if you look at all other religions, every religion is born out of a certain piece of land.

According to the participants, most religious people base their belief on emotions rather than on reason. These emotions are engendered by a number of factors such as family tradition, or fear of death. Religious groups, particularly Christians, are labeled as bigoted, blindly rejecting ideas not consistent with their beliefs. For example, in one atheist post, faith is defined as "a belief based on want without emphasis of facts or evidence" (Atheist Empire, n.d.b). A club member added:

A lot of people believe in God do so simply because their parents are [sic], so they trust their parents to be right, so they believe in the same God their parents did, it's comforting when you think after you die, your family members will see each other again, and so it's hard for some people to accept that that's not real because they are emotional.

The ritual of invoking science/reason contributes to an organizational culture, further reified by a ritual of community.

Ritual of Developing Community

The Atheist/Agnostic organization enacts numerous practices that resemble religious functions, like church, and thus demonstrate a ritual of community. This ritual refers to the communicative practice of creating fellowship between individuals who collectively accede to free-thinking doctrine. For example, during one meeting a member gave a "sermonette" (his language, not ours). Members also will reference particular "sacred texts" like "God's Delusion," the "Annotated Skeptics Bible," the "Communist Manifesto," and anti-religious documentaries in a similar manner as Christians might refer to the Bible, Mormons to the Book of Mormon, and Muslims to the Quran. Traveling to regional conferences also is a common practice within the A & A community. Atheists/agnostics also describe a desire to "evangelize" (our language, not theirs), to get the message out to both fellow non-believers, and religious adherents. One member described this practice as part of "a religion of argument of disbelief," and parallel to religious communities; "anyone who thinks they know the truth wants to go out and tell everybody." The club members are in the process of forming coalitions with other local atheist/agnostic clubs in an effort to spread the free-thinking gospel. As alluded to in the ritual of negation/challenge, "evangelistic" dialogue with believers about religious topics is done very strategically, picking opportune moments to engage:

Most [people of faith] want to talk about themselves. If you just ask them about themselves, they'll start telling you their beliefs. Sooner or later they'll ask, 'well what about you?' So I wait for those moments.

Club discussions often revolve around religiously relevant news, and "how one can be an atheist in a world that forces you to be religious." Humor plays a significant role in the facilitation of both the physical and virtual communities, particularly in the form of jokes at the expense of believers, most frequently Christians. The ritual of community generates an excitement and enthusiasm within club members for meeting with likeminded people, with whom they can talk about topics that they do not normally have the liberty to discuss.

It's just healthy. Because atheists like to talk about certain things. You cannot talk about atheism with a large population of people because they will get offended. You are alone by yourself, surrounded by a lot of religious people who will not talk about atheism.

As "social animals," community members articulated that they were drawn to the group because of their shared interests and similar passions. In the context of the A & A organization, members experience a sensation of "fitting in."

Well, humans are social animals. And to deny that we're social animals is to fall into depression, to fall into suicidal tendencies.

The needs that are fulfilled by organizing resemble the reasons often articulated by members of religious communities. One atheist/agnostic member suggested that community was the one legitimate reason for attending a religious event. In regards to the A & A club, he remarked, "It's like going to church, like for normal people. People go there for community. It's very comforting for me. I can speak my mind. There I can just let it out, say what I want. It's a good feeling." The

online atheist networks serve a similar function, but are not confined by temporal or spatial restrictions. Members of these virtual communities, many who rail against political restraints in their countries, mirror the fulfillment that community provides in the interpersonal group:

i love ur website. it has made me realize that i am an atheist!!!! FINALLY!!!! im from the philippines and i think there are a lot of atheist here its just that they are afraid to show it because almost everybody here believes in god, i know it sucks. anyway i really appreciate ur site very much. keep up the good work [sic]. (Atheist Empire, n.d.c)

In addition to feelings of belonging, the club provides an important venue for members' convictions to be strengthened, and ammunition for interaction with religious adherents. "It's totally Groupthink, you walk in and everyone re-solidifies their belief by hearing everyone else's belief. You see their arguments, 'well of course that's right.'" The strengthening of beliefs through community and argumentation highlights an important connection between religious and non-religious practices.

I think that people of religious groups meet together for the strength. Kind of the same way like we meet together, we hang out for companionship...to strengthen our beliefs. But they have a belief to talk about, but we have an absence of belief.

This previous quotation brings together the rituals of community and negation. As evidenced in the ritual of challenge, atheists/agnostics continually wrestle over religious issues in a pursuit that perhaps will never be completely resolved, and a willingness to modify one's own views if another club member makes a convincing argument.

I think a lot of people have a desire to know what is true or real, and this is one outlet for pursuing that, interact with those people and sharing ideas, try to learn what's true, that's really fulfilling to me, learning new things.

An essential impetus for the ritual of community is the designation of minority status and its ramifications, including discrimination, stereotypes and criticism.

Atheism, non-believers is a very small percentage of people in the world, especially in America, and to find other people with the same ideas is very refreshing. We are very isolated, we just don't get that companionship, so as far as it is important that it just brings us together. Many groups have their churches, they have their synagogue, temple, they already have that community. The fact is we don't have church, synagogue, but we have to find some way to meet.

As a result of feeling attacked, atheists often feel like they have to conceal their identity, which enhances the meaning of the ritual of community. As one person explained, "Atheists might feel that they are being attacked. Just by being atheists they are offending people. And so it causes them need to be quiet." Therefore, A & A members balance the needs of making the club visible and invisible. In the process of creating community among atheists and agnostics, club members posit the importance of non-structure.

Ritual of Non-structure

Although the atheist and agnostic club members meet weekly and have bureaucratic positions like president and vice president, most of the group members emphasized the casualness and unstructured nature of their group. Discussion is the primary act in the club meetings. From week to week, there is no set agenda or speaker. The group members talk about things that interest them, moving from one topic to another, allowing opportunities for everyone to express their views. Besides the content of the meeting, the whole atmosphere is casual as well. Everyone sits in a circle and casually discusses things they have read or seen recently. Club members use the word "informal" and "unstructured" to describe their meetings, and set them

apart from the get-togethers of their religious counterparts. As one participant asked, “If one can learn new ideas without, religion, why bother with structure?” This unstructured culture symbolically constitutes the space as an exchange of ideas in a spirit of polyvocality, as opposed to religious groups that posit an adherence to one Absolute Truth. This ritual is a manifestation of larger ontological assumptions.

We can talk about anything, it doesn't have to relate to religion, it can just be about what happens in school and as far as how it works at a typical meeting, it's very informal, that's the beauty of free-thought, of non-believers.

Ritual of Celebrating Humanism and Freedom

Generally associated with Renaissance philosophers, humanism foregrounds human potential and agency in the search for truth and morality (Borchert, 2006) In the context of the physical and virtual groups, humanism functions as more than just a belief system but a ritual that is enacted communicatively. The traits of humanism were evidenced in many of the club members accounts. The A & A community rejects religion's moralizing function, and believe in their own ability to pursue truth and goodness. As one member explained, “[Atheism is] not a belief itself, it's a kind of reason, dispassionate look at the facts. We [atheists] will be the best indicator of reality, getting rid of any kind of supernatural.” One of the byproducts of the ritual of humanism is the stress on freedom. The group of atheists and agnostics enjoy their freedom in two aspects: freedom from the limitation of doctrine and freedom of thought. Most of the community members do not identify with the moral standards in the Bible, and consider the discursive practice of not believing in God as a liberation from the restriction of meaningless doctrine. As one member expressed, “Not having a belief in God like that frees you from the ideas about the things that are not appropriate to do, I think that is important.” Most of the

participants attend the club because the meetings provide an outlet to freely share ideas. As one person articulated, “Religion has strengthened the numbers, atheism has strengthened the ideas.”

The freedom to share ideas, as freethinkers and truth pursuers, is a valued ritual.

I can feel free to talk about this (religious topic) to atheists and agnostics without feeling like ripping apart somebody’s core beliefs. But religious people, they are so blinded by their own beliefs, they won’t accept any reason of thought.

This ritual further entails a freedom from the construction of beliefs taught to them as children.

I can't believe my parents filled my mind with useless riff raff for ten years. Finally I can be free of such beliefs. I only hope more people can open their eyes and ears to what atheists such as myself have to say. (Atheist Empire, n.d.c)

Ritual of Moral living

One of the central irreligious arguments against theists, particularly Christians, is that as much as believers hold that morals and ethics are taught by God, the truth is that morality is derived from natural laws rather than religion, and that people can live a moral life without God. As one student group community member remarked, “I don’t agree with the notion that all were made in God's image. People suffer every day. Diseases. God's ideas of just, I just don't see it.” There is a consensus among the atheist community that morality is not unique to Christianity.

I don’t think that it’s necessary to have religions to have those moral values.

‘People will not have morals if not for religion,’ that seems absurd to me. There has been studies done that people really have a universal moral code to some extent. I don’t think that religion has a monopoly on morality.

Therefore, atheists/agnostics perform a ritual of morality. Free-thinkers also argue that the Bible contains a considerable number of immoral statements, and that the biblical God is cruel. For

instance, “God punishes Eve, and all women after her, with the pains of childbirth and subjection to men,” and “because God liked Abel's animal sacrifice more than Cain's vegetables, Cain kills his brother Abel in a fit of religious jealousy” (Skeptics Annotated Bible, n.d.). Non-believers challenge biblical passages on slavery, treatment of women, and human/animal sacrifice, on moral grounds. Atheists also feel that Christians do not live up to their claimed moral standards, while some non-believers are “blown away by how radical Christians can be.” With agreement on the lack of morality in religion, the atheist community has set up its own moral code. By living up to a high moral standard, atheists strive to prove that morality is a natural and universal concept rather than a religious one.

Discussion

Our study examined seven communicative rituals shared by atheists and agnostics, evident in both a student club and online virtual groups. First, the ritual of conversion suggests that atheists/agnostics go through a transitional process parallel to religious conversion. Second, atheists/agnostics perform a ritual of negation, encouraging questioning as opposed to compliance. This is consistent with extant scholarship that has articulated the fulminant and oppositional nature of atheist/agnostic rituals (Hart, 1978; Richardson, 2003). Third, the habitual invocation of science and reason distinguishes free-thinking in-group members from religious out-groups. Fourth, the alternative tradition's ritual of community parallels ecclesiastical rituals, through which atheists/agnostics strengthen their unbelief and nurture fellowship among members. This community provides an important sanctuary where people can openly express their beliefs without fear of repercussion (Richardson, 2003). Fifth, the atheist/agnostic community performs the ritual of non-structure as an act of deconstruction of religious structure. Sixth, the ritual of celebrating humanism and freedom stresses atheist/agnostic self-pride, and

freedom from doctrine and in ideas. Finally, unbelievers posit their own moral code in objection to the idea that morality is derived from religion rather than from natural laws.

Theoretically, the presence of communicative rituals in atheist and agnostic groups suggests that language similarity between this community and its religious counterparts is prevalent. This is consistent with Hart's (1978) argument that atheist rhetoric largely relies on religious communication, and that atheists predominately react to religious messages rather than creating ones of their own. It seems that a purely alternative discourse is absent from the alternative tradition. The presence of rituals is an important organizing element for groups (Bossard & Boll, 1950; Knuf, 1989-1990; Pacanowsky & Trujillo, 1983; Sigman, 1991; Wolin & Bennett, 1984). In addition to language, our study suggests that atheists/agnostics share a similar communicative pattern with their counterparts, which has significant practical implications. Atheist/agnostic groups engage in communicative acts, such as the rituals of conversion and community, that function similarly as their religious equivalents. The presence of such ritualistic practices in atheist/agnostic groups coincides with Hedley's (1979) articulation of the parallels between believers and non-believers. By problematizing the discursively constructed division between religious and irreligious groups, the researchers believe that common ground can be forged between these two positions, and we hope to provide an impetus for meaningful dialogue. The underlying objective of this study was to answer the question, is it possible for people to engage in religious discussion, hold divergent points of view, and yet enjoy fruitful interaction?

A number of limitations and areas for future research are evident from this study. First, although all three researchers self-identify as Christians, this did not affect our ability to build rapport with club members. However, it is possible that our religious backgrounds influenced our analysis of the data in subconscious, but significant, ways. As such, this study is

not intended to be the end-all statement on the subject, but is intended to generate increased religious dialogue between theistic and atheistic individuals and groups. Secondly, every participant in this study is a college student from the same university. This certainly reduces the level of diversity in the sample. Future research should incorporate more diversity in terms of age, region, educational background. This study primarily examined active atheistic/agnostic communities, in physical and virtual groups. Future research that distinguishes between active and passive groups (i.e. atheists who intentionally chose not to belong to one of these communities) would provide for beneficial insight. Thirdly, in addition to analyzing online network posts, e-interviews with these virtual members would allow for more atheist and agnostic voices to be heard. Internet-based interaction reflects changes within society at large (Campbell, 2004) and should be included in our approaches to studying communities. These online forums provide valuable spaces for spiritual experience and communication. Thus, online interviews could greatly enhance what we know, through traditional face-to-face interviews, about atheist/agnostic communities.

Considering that atheists and agnostics often join together in the same groups, and the similarity between these two groups, we examined them as one community in this study. However, there are significant differences between them (Dawson, 2000), and these differences certainly influence the performance of communicative rituals. So, future studies separating these two groups would be beneficial. The agnostic voice is underrepresented in this study. In the club meetings we attended, most of the members are atheist and discussion tends to revolve around atheist topics. Among the six interviewees, only one self-avowed as agnostic. Additionally, all of the websites we analyzed were labeled atheist. A more even balance between these two groups in future research would provide for a more comprehensive and reliable understanding.

This study explored the existence of

communicative rituals in atheist/agnostic communities. As members of a minority and underrepresented group, ideological differences with their religious counterparts often engender communicative conflict, and thus brings the A & A community together as a group. The seven rituals summarized in this study provide a snap shot of the atheist/agnostic culture. By better understanding the atheist/agnostic context, we will be better equipped to communicate between groups with divergent ideologies. As one participant articulated, “Co-exist is the key.”

References

- American Atheists. (n.d.a). *Evolution/creationism*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.atheists.org/evolution/>
- American Atheists. (n.d.b). *Introduction*. Retrieved November 11, 2007 from <http://www.atheists.org/visitors.center/intro.html>
- Atheist Alliance (n.d.a). *Awakenings*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.atheistalliance.org/awakenings>
- Atheist Alliance. (n.d.b). *Freethought Directory Online*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.atheistalliance.org/directory/list.php>
- Atheist Alliance. (n.d.c) Humor. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.atheistalliance.org/humor/index.php>
- Atheist Alliance. (n.d.d). *Young atheists and freethinkers discussion list*. Retrieved on November 9, 2007 from http://www.atheistalliance.org/internet/net_young.php.
- Atheist Empire. (n.d.a). *Atheist Empire*. Retrieved November 11, 2007 from <http://atheistempire.com/>
- Atheist Empire. (n.d.b). *Attacking Belief from All Sides*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from http://atheistempire.com/atheism/attacking_belief.html
- Atheist Empire. (n.d.c). *Guestbook*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://atheistempire.com/comm/guestbook3.html>
- Atheist Empire. (n.d.d). *Can't we all just get along?* Retrieved December 4, 2007 from http://atheistempire.com/atheism/get_along.php
- Bateson, G. (1987). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson.
- Baym, N.K. (1998). The emergence of online community. In S.G. Jones (Ed.), *CyberSociety 2.0:*

- Revisiting computer-mediated communication and community* (pp. 35-68). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Borchert, D.M. (Ed.). (2006). *Encyclopedia of philosophy* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: MacMillan Press.
- Bossard, J. H. S., & Boll, E. S. (1950). *Ritual in family living: A contemporary study*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- Carey, J.W. (Ed.). (1988). *Media, myths, and narratives: Television and the press*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Carey, J.W. (Ed.). (1989). *Communication as culture: Essays on media and society*. Boston, MA: Unwin Hyman.
- Coupland, J., Coupland, N., & Robinson, J.D. (1992). "How are you?": Negotiating phatic communication. *Language in Society*, 13, 327-343.
- Dawson, S. (2000, March 22). Shermer's agnosticism. *Skeptic*, 8(2). Retrieved November 8, 2007 from lexisnexis.com
- Dayan, D., & Katz, E. (1992). *Media events: The live broadcasting of history*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University.
- Demerath, N.J. III, & Thiessen V. (1966). On spitting against the wind: organizational precariousness and American irreligion. *American Journal of Sociology* 71, 674-687.
- Emmons, R.A., & Paloutzian, R.F. (2003). The psychology of religion. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 54, 377-402).
- Firth, R. (1972). Verbal and bodily rituals of greeting and parting. In J.S. LaFontaine (Ed.), *The interpretation of ritual: Essays in honor of A.I. Richards* (pp. 1-38). London, UK: Tavistock.

- Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. New York: Anchor.
- Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. New York, NY: Anchor.
- Goody, E. (1972). Greeting, begging, and the presentation of respect. In J. S. LaFontaine (Ed.), *The interpretation of ritual: Essays in honor of A. I. Richards* (p. 39-71). London, UK: Tavistock.
- Hart, R.P. (1978). An unquiet desperation: Rhetorical aspects of “popular” atheism in the United States. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 64, 33-46.
- Hedley, G. (1979). *The superstitions of the irreligious*. Westport, CT: Greenwood.
- Hill, P.C., Pargament, K.I., Hood Jr., R.W., McCullough, M.E., Swyers, J.P., Larson, D.B., & Zinnbauer, B.J. (2000). Conceptualizing religion and spirituality: Points of commonality, points of departure. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, 30, 51-77.
- Knuf, J. (1989-1990). Where cultures meet: Ritual code and organizational boundary management. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 23, 109-138.
- Lincoln, Y.S., & Guba, E.G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Lull, J. (Ed.). (1988). *World families watch television*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Mansfield, H. (2007, August 13). Atheist tracts: God, they’re predictable. *The Weekly Standard*, 12(45). Retrieved November 8, 2007 from lexisnexis.com
- McGrath, A. (2004, September 18). The incoming sea of faith: Alister McGrath says that atheism has been discredited by the collapse of communism and the postmodern need for tolerance. *The Spectator*, 12-13.
- Morley, D. (1992). *Television, audiences, and cultural studies*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Pacanowsky, M.E., & O’Donnell-Trujillo, N. (1983). Organizational communication as cultural

- performance. *Communication Monographs*, 50, 126-147.
- Pearsall, J. (Ed.) (1998). *The new Oxford dictionary of English*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Richardson, J.D. (2003). Uses and gratifications of agnostic refuge: Case study of a skeptical online congregation. *Journal of Media and Religion*, 2(4), 237-250.
- Rothenbuhler, E. W. (1998). *Ritual communication: From everyday conversation to mediated ceremony*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Rothenbuhler, E. W. (2006) Communication as ritual. In G. J. Shepherd, J. St. John, & T. Striplas (Eds.) *Communication as...perspectives on theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sigman, S. J. (1991). Handling the discontinuous aspects of continuous social relationships: Toward research on the persistence of social forms. *Communication Theory*, 1, 106-127.
- Skeptics Annotated Bible. (n.d.). *Injustices in the Bible*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.skepticsannotatedbible.com/inj/long.html>
- Strem, G.G. (1986). *Agnosticism is also faith*. San Diego, CA: Libra.
- Tamney, J.B., Hopkins, K., & Jacovini, J. (1965). A social-psychological study of religious nonbelievers. *Social compass*, 12, 177-186.
- Thrower, J. (1980). *The alternative tradition: Religion and the rejection of religion in the ancient world*. The Hague, NL: Mouton.
- Thrower, J. (2000). *Western atheism: A short history*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus.
- Turner, D. (2002). *How to be an atheist*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2001). *Self-described Religious Identification of Adult Population Report*. Retrieved December 4, 2007 from <http://www.census.gov>
- Van Heerden, A. (2004, June 1). Why atheism is unscientific: Critical essay. *Contemporary Review*, 1661(284), 351-354.

Watzlawick, P., Beavin, J. H., & Jackson, D. D. (1967). *Pragmatics of human communication: A study of interactional patterns, pathologies, and paradoxes*. New York, NY: Norton.

Wolin, S. J., & Bennett, L. A. (1984). Family rituals. *Family Process*, 23, 401-420.

Wong, D.A. (2001). *Sounding the center: History and aesthetics in Thai Buddhist performance*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago.