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Organizational Variation in the American Nonreligious Community

1 Introduction

Social scientists are learning more about nonreligion and those who claim no religious preference. Recent research focuses on the growth of the unaffiliated (Baker and Smith 2015; Hout and Fischer 2002), how and why individuals become nonreligious (Fazzino 2014; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Ritchey 2009; Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2012a), collective identity formation (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; LeDrew 2013; Smith 2013), prejudice and discrimination directed toward atheists (Cragun et al. 2012; Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006; Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011), and the rise of New Atheism, facilitated by new media and the popularity of atheist writers (Amarasingam 2012; Cimino and Smith 2014).¹

Some of these researchers have also addressed nonreligious organizations, or groups that offer activities and services to those who identify with nonreligious labels. Thus, these groups are specifically not religious, not merely religiously neutral (Eller 2010). Recent research suggests that the nonreligious community is a heterogeneous one, that nonreligious identities and the pathways that lead to them may just be as diverse as religious ones, and that “typologies” of non-belief can be developed (Cotter 2015; Mastiaux, this volume; Silver et al. 2014; Zuckerman 2012b). Given this variation in nonreligious identities, we can reasonably expect to encounter heterogeneity in organizational structures and outcomes as well. This prompts me to ask: What are the different organizational types that exist in the American nonreligious community? What purposes do they serve for the people who join them? What kinds of events, activities, and services do they provide? These are largely descriptive questions and answering them will provide a context in which individual and collective meaning making takes place.

Several methods of categorizing organizational activity into a typology could be employed effectively. Such groups could be organized based on the identity of individuals who join them: an organization for atheists, an organization for hu-

¹ Summaries of previous research on nonreligion can be found in several chapters throughout this volume.
manists, an organization for skeptics, and so on. While the names of organizations often reflect such categorization, this may not produce the most informative typology. The terminology used to describe nontheistic labels and ideologies – both by laypeople and the academics who study them – is diverse and contested (Lee 2012). These labels are undoubtedly important to nonbelievers, who often make subtle distinctions when discussing their nonreligious identities. However, if presented a laundry list of nonreligious labels, many nonbelievers would identify with multiple labels (Langston, Hammer, and Cragun, this volume).

I believe a more useful way to categorize these groups – that is, assign them identities – is by their functions, purposes, goals, or the chief benefits they aim to provide for their members, which can be expressed through the types of events that organizations offer. To determine what these functions are, I analyzed meetings and activities hosted and sponsored by several nonreligious organizations in Houston, Texas. In the remainder of this chapter, I will discuss some relevant literature on nonreligion, and how organization theory can be applied to the study of nonreligion. I will then describe methods of data collection, the organizations observed, and the sample of nonbelievers interviewed for this project. Next, I will detail a typology of the events that are hosted, sponsored, and promoted by Houston’s nonreligious organizations, which I suggest can be used to determine an organization’s most salient identity. Finally, I will briefly discuss the implications of gaining a better understanding of organized nonreligion.

2 Background

2.1 Nonreligion Studies

Lois Lee defines nonreligion as “anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion” (2012, 131). Nonreligion is associated with a number of terms; if nonreligious individuals choose a label at all, they may use words such as atheist, agnostic, skeptic, humanist, freethinker, or secularist to describe themselves. (I refer to these individuals collectively as “nonbelievers.”) In the past, researchers have been reluctant to view nonreligion as a social phenomenon rather than an individual one because, historically, it has been seen as a force that promotes individualism rather than integration, with nonbelievers being perceived as immoral, nonconforming, and alienated (Campbell [1971] 2013). However, the social significance of nonreligion is especially evident today as more people organize themselves into coherent structures that explicitly reject religious belief.
Much of the research on the nonreligious focuses on individuals’ identity formation and the stigma they face, particularly if claiming an atheist identity. Nonbelievers have consistently remained a stigmatized group, despite the fact that they are slowly gaining acceptance in American society, though at a slower rate than other marginalized groups (Edgell et al. 2006; Edgell et al. 2016). Research on perceptions of atheists shows that out of a long list of minority groups, atheists consistently rank as one of the least liked and most distrusted; Americans see atheists as a cultural threat and the group least likely to share their vision of American society, compared to Muslims, immigrants, and LGBTQ individuals (Edgell et al. 2006). Other research suggests that people see atheists as a sort of “ethical wildcard” and are unsure of what they actually believe (Gervais et al. 2011, 2012).

As this stigma is discreditable and not immediately visible to others (Goffman 1963), atheists are able to “pass” as believers if they wish; in such cases, the stigmatized individual is typically responsible for signaling to others that he or she does not fit normative assumptions (Gagne, Tewksbury, and McGaughey 1997). Some nonbelievers are reticent to disclose their lack of belief, fearing they may experience disapproval or rejection from others (Smith 2011). Thus, nonreligious organizations may be a valuable resource for nonbelievers, aiding in the management and normalization of this stigmatized identity (Doane and Elliott 2014).

2.2 Organization Theory

Organizational involvement could be a significant variable in the nonreligious experience; thus, it is important to examine the types of organizations in which nonbelievers choose to spend their time. Within the nonreligious community, organizations will take on different roles, or, I suggest, embrace different identities that are displayed to the public via the events they offer.

Social scientists have no shortage of interpretations surrounding the term “identity.” It can be understood both as an internalized aspect of one’s self and as a group or collective phenomenon (Owens 2003). It can serve as a motivator of social or political action, but can also be a consequence of such action (Brubaker and Cooper 2000). It is a concept that transcends levels of analysis and can be investigated at the individual, group, or organization level (Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley 2011; Gioia 1998; Whetten 1998). Like individuals, organizations need answers to identity questions like “Who are we?” or “What do we want to be?” in order to successfully interact with and communicate their values and goals to others (Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton 2000; Albert and Whetten
Organizational identity refers to what members “perceive, feel and think” about the organization they belong to (Hatch and Schultz 2007, 357). It allows an organization to distinguish itself from others that may share common goals and functions by expressing its “character,” or whatever the group deems “important and essential” (Albert and Whetten 1985, 266).

Organization theorists suggest that outsiders can affect the character of an organization (Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Hsu and Hannan 2005). This is a significant point because much research has focused on the negative perceptions people have of atheists, but less has examined how nonbelievers respond to these perceptions as collectives (see Fazzino, Borer, Abdel Haq 2014; Guenther 2014; Zuckerman 2014, 11–37). Some nonbelievers may expend considerable effort toward dispelling the stereotypes attributed to them, which can be funneled through organizational channels; in other words, if nonbelievers wish to signal to outsiders that they are socially engaged, compassionate, or ethical, they may form or join an organization that prioritizes the qualities they value. Action within the context of nonreligious organizations, then, can help members manage the impressions they (as nonbelievers) give others (see Smith 2013). However, since little is known about what nonreligious organizations actually do, reactions to such groups—from both average religious Americans and the nonbelievers unfamiliar with them—can be critical. This is especially true of organizations that more closely resemble religious groups, perhaps because the idea of organized nonreligion is counterintuitive (see Smith, Frost, this volume). Research has suggested that organizations with contradictory elements can elicit aggressive responses (Galaskiewicz and Barringer 2012); since nonbelievers reject belief in a supernatural deity, others assume that they will reject other aspects of religion (e.g., a strong moral code) as well.

To this point, such organizations have been utilized primarily as a strategy of sampling for atheists, or a context where nonreligious identities are fostered (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; LeDrew 2013; Ritchey 2009; Smith 2013). However, with few exceptions, researchers have not closely examined nonreligious organizations as entities in and of themselves, their variation, or how these formal and informal groups might affect (or be affected by) those who join them (see Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Lee 2015, 106–130; Zuckerman 2014, 107–136). Research that does address nonreligious organizations usually refers to such groups abstractly and as a united collective, rather than parsing out the specific and diverse goals that each organization in a given area may have (though see Shook, this volume). Recognizing that not all organizations are created equal can allow for more nuance in our discussions of nonbelievers’ identities, motivations, beliefs, and practices. Shedding light on what each of these
organizations does may also broaden perceptions of nonbelievers and organized nonreligion as a whole.

3 Data and Methods

As part of a larger project, I used qualitative research methods to explore how individual and collective nonreligious experiences manifest as organizational action; this chapter describes such action. I conducted approximately 80 discrete observations among eight local nonreligious organizations in the Houston area, over a period of eight months. I conducted 125 semi-structured in-depth interviews with founders, leaders, and members of these groups, as well as people who were not actively involved. I also performed content analysis on websites, interactions on social media, and literature distributed at events. Field notes and transcripts were coded line by line and patterns emerged inductively, allowing me to discern variation in the activities and events each organization hosted. I analyzed each organization’s self-description (usually published on a website or in distributed written material), what members said about the organizations, and my own observations of events and activities. In cases where these accounts differ, I defer to my observations and justify my reasoning for doing so. By triangulating observations, personal accounts, and recorded material, I was able to construct a typology of nonreligious events. The events sponsored by nonreligious organizations reflect their members’ priorities, and by focusing on events (i.e., what the organizations do), we can determine their “essential character” (i.e., what they are).

3.1 The Setting

Houston seems an ideal setting to conduct research on organized nonreligion. Texas is generally socially and politically conservative, and many Texans are evangelical Protestants. Houston is also home to several of the largest megachurches in the US. It is consistently ranked by national polls as one of the most religious states, having above average levels of affiliation, belief, commitment, and religious behaviors. However, Houston also claims to host the world’s largest atheist community and provides a diverse range of events for those who identify with various nonreligious labels.

The city appears to be in a “Goldilocks zone” between high and low levels of secularity that allow nonreligious organizations to thrive. Houston is the fourth-largest city in the US, set to overtake Chicago in the coming decades. It is descri-
bed by its inhabitants as “cosmopolitan” and is one of the most diverse cities in the country—racially, ethnically, and culturally (Klinenberg 2016; Steptoe 2016). In order for its inhabitants to coexist, it must be tolerant of diversity to some extent. At the same time, Houston is located firmly in the Bible Belt, not far removed from the Deep South, where religion is prevalent enough that nonbelievers can expect to encounter it in everyday interactions. Nonbelievers in Houston report hearing religion in political rhetoric (both locally and nationally), seeing it make its way into public classrooms, and frequently being asked, “Where do you go to church?” upon meeting new acquaintances. Nonbelievers in places like Houston may feel a greater need to organize in response to religion than those in more secular communities like Boston, San Francisco, or Seattle, while simultaneously feeling safer openly doing so than in predominately conservative Christian or rural communities.

However, this should not suggest that cities or regions that are more or less religious than average cannot produce successful nonreligious organizations. For example, some research has described successful atheist groups in rural areas, even in the face of resistance and marginalization from religious others (Ritchey 2009). Conversely, the Sunday Assembly—a growing secular organization that emulates church services—was founded in London, despite nearly half of Britons having no religious affiliation (Bagand Voas 2010). Further research in a range of settings is needed to confirm any concrete patterns of organizational vitality, though García and Blankholm (2016) suggest that nonreligious organizations tend to emerge in US counties with larger populations of evangelical Protestants.

### 3.2 The Organizations

Nearly all nonreligious organizations in Houston have a public online presence (e.g., social networking sites like Meetup.com and Facebook.com), so as to attract participants. Houston hosts several large local nonreligious organizations (totaling 5,000+ online members at the time of fieldwork) that provide a variety of gatherings for nonbelievers. I conducted participant observation among eight of these organizations, each hosting regularly scheduled, recurring events open to the public; that is, all organizations discussed here sponsor events that occur weekly, biweekly, monthly, quarterly, or annually, which anyone can attend.

The three largest nonreligious organizations—Houston Atheists (HA), the Humanists of Houston (HOH), and the Greater Houston Skeptic Society (GHSS)—host or promote a variety of gatherings (e.g., coffee socials, discussion groups, family-friendly happy hours, volunteer opportunities, meditation) that may ap-
peal to different niches (much like the national organizations described by Fazzino and Cragun, this volume) and draw in different types of nonbelievers (like those described by Mastiaux, this volume). Another organization, the Houston Oasis (Oasis, hereafter) – dubbed a “godless congregation” due to its churchlike structure – meets every Sunday for coffee and fellowship, music, and a lecture. (At the time of fieldwork, Oasis had also launched “franchises” in Kansas City and Dallas, and were preparing to launch in Boston.) Smaller groups in the Houston area include Houston Church of Freethought (HCoF), Natural Spiritualists (NS), Houston Black Nonbelievers (HBN), and a local chapter of the national organization Americans United for the Separation of Church and State (AU). Some of these groups also coordinated action with an Austin-based organization, Atheists Helping the Homeless (AHH), though I did not directly observe this group.

3.3 Sample

My sample of interview respondents shares many demographic characteristics with those of previous research on nonreligion. Slightly over half of respondents were male, over two-thirds were white, about three-quarters had a bachelor’s degree or higher, and three-quarters identified as politically left-leaning, with a median age of 43 (ranging from 20 to 84). Respondents were recruited directly from group meetings, via Meetup mailing lists or Facebook posts (depending on the recommendation of group leaders), and by word-of-mouth and snowball sampling. Most participants grew up with some degree of socialization in Protestant Christian denominations, though I also interviewed people who were raised Catholic, Mormon, Jehovah’s Witness, Muslim, Hindu, and nothing in particular.

Since there is no obligation to attend meetings after joining nonreligious groups online, by sending requests for interviews using Meetup and Facebook (rather than recruiting solely from group meetings) I was able to reach people with various levels of involvement with the organizations, including founders, leaders, regular attendees, those who attend occasionally or rarely, those who used to but no longer attend, those who have not yet attended but intend to, and those who have no interest in attending face-to-face events. Speaking with nonbelievers about their organizational affiliations and preferences (or lack thereof) provided insight into how people viewed these groups and what they offer, and whether or not these impressions matched those that organizations were attempting to give.
4 A Typology of Nonreligious Events and Organizations

As the number of nonreligious organizations increases in a given area, they may develop distinctive characteristics and values in order to differentiate themselves from others. In this way, nonreligious organizations do more than provide a space where people can simply “not believe in God”; they serve specific purposes and fulfill functions (many of which echo those fulfilled by churches) that they cannot or choose not to fulfill via other means.

Table 1. Typology of Nonreligious Events and Organizational Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of event</th>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Examples of meetings and activities</th>
<th>Organization(s) displaying identity as most salient</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Socializing with like-minded others</td>
<td>Dinner, happy hour, game nights</td>
<td>Houston Atheists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communal</td>
<td>Community building</td>
<td>Church-like gatherings, fundraising, potlucks</td>
<td>Houston Oasis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational</td>
<td>Learning and engaging in structured discussion</td>
<td>Lectures/presentations, debates, book clubs</td>
<td>Humanists of Houston, Greater Houston Skeptics Society, Houston Black Nonbelievers, Houston Church of Free-thought</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political</td>
<td>Raising awareness of church/state issues</td>
<td>Protests, political discussions, rallies</td>
<td>Americans United for the Separation of Church and State</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charitable</td>
<td>Donating and volunteering</td>
<td>Blood drives, food bank, sorting donated items</td>
<td>Atheists Helping the Homeless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Experiencing emotions associated with religion</td>
<td>Meditation, philosophical discussions</td>
<td>Spiritual Naturalists</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The typology shown in Table 1 and developed below is based on the various types of events that nonreligious organizations sponsor, which are typically organized, hosted, or promoted by leaders and/or a core group of highly active members. I classify these activities as falling into six categories: social, communal, educational, political, charitable, and spiritual. These “types of events” can serve as a proxy for organizational identity: an organization that hosts primarily
social events can be considered a “social” organization, an organization that hosts primarily educational events is considered an “educational” organization, and so forth. Thus, the identities assigned to the organizations described below are ideal types. In practice, organizations may display different identities at different times by offering different types of meetings and activities that provide different purposes. This is of course true of individuals as well: we are capable of having multiple identities, but at any given moment one of our identities may be more salient than another (Stryker and Burke 2000). If an organization tends to stress a particular purpose over others, if certain events prove more popular by drawing larger crowds, or if the group sponsors a particular type of activity more frequently than others, I consider this its primary, or most salient, organizational identity.

It is also important to note that assigning identities based on events that reflect a group’s primary purpose – determined by the organizations’ stated missions, what members say about them (during interviews, in passing at meetings, and online), and my own impressions of the events they sponsor – is not the only way to categorize nonreligious organizations. As mentioned previously, they could be categorized based on the identities of those who join them (atheist, humanist, skeptic, etc.), though I am skeptical of the usefulness of such a typology at the organization level. Organizations could also be categorized by their leadership structures, or level of formality. They may have hierarchical leadership, with a president and board of directors who administrate all activity, or they may be structured horizontally, with responsibilities diffused among many committed members. They can be run as dictatorships or democracies. They can be formalized with 501(c)(3) status, securing the same legal and monetary benefits granted to other non-profit organizations, or pursue no such ambitions. Meetings may have strict agendas or none at all. This is an avenue certainly worth exploring further; indeed, the groups I observed did display a variety of organizational structures, though as a typology it may not capture the variation that manifests via a group’s diverse membership. Ultimately, based on the data collected, I constructed a typology based on events, which I believe represents the character of the organizations and values of their members.

4.1 Social

Some nonreligious organizations are primarily social in nature. Houston Atheists, for example, prioritizes providing members a safe space to socialize with like-minded others, where the topic of religion will not be a point of contention. Other research has identified this as a key reason people give for joining an athe-
ist community (Tomlins 2015). In fact, at HA events, religion often was not a popular topic of conversation. Throughout the course of fieldwork, I noticed that if someone was a first-time attendee at these types of events, they were often asked about their religious background, or how long they had been a nonbeliever. It was typically assumed that fellow attendees had “de-converted” from religion or somehow “discovered” atheism. In fact, only one interviewee of 125 explicitly indicated being raised an atheist; all other respondents were either raised in some religious tradition or as “nothing in particular” before they concluded at some point that they did not believe. As these organizations are, by name, non-religious, this topic often fueled initial conversations between new acquaintances. After these brief “introductory” talks, conversation usually shifted, often revolving around topics like science, entertainment, or current events.

Still, in the event that the topic of religion did come up, members could rest assured that there would be no need to “come out of the closet” like there might be in other social settings. Pat², a member of HA, had this to say about the group’s social gatherings:

One big thing that can make you uncomfortable if you’re looking for friends and you’re an atheist is, you know, if the person is religious it’s inevitably going to come up, and you’re going to have to deal with it. But sidestepping, skipping that whole issue is nice. So it doesn’t mean you’re going to like everybody or you’re going to agree with everybody on political issues or anything like that, but that’s one big topic that you can avoid, which is nice.

Being able to disclose a nonreligious identity without risk of judgment was a big draw for many people who chose to attend these meetings. Regardless of the sponsoring organization, these events share some characteristics: there is nearly always food, coffee, or alcohol and there is rarely an agenda. There is also no leader or designated authority figure directing action or conversation. They are usually held in public spaces like a restaurant or bar, or occasionally at a group member’s home in the form of a potluck. Nearly all of the nonreligious organizations in Houston offered informal social gatherings throughout the month, though most did not prioritize these types of meetings.

² Interview respondents have been given pseudonyms. Names of organizations and their leaders (publically available information) have not been altered.
4.2 Communal

Nonreligious organizations can also be communal. Members strive to share knowledge, skills, and services with one another, with a focus on creating community. Over the course of my fieldwork, I began encountering events and activities that involved gathering members together in a shared safe space, but did not quite fall into the strictly “social” category described above. The idea of “community,” I found, is deeper than simply meeting a basic desire to socialize.

At social events, participants meet over food or drink for conversation with other nonbelievers, which may or may not result in the same people gathering at the same place for subsequent gatherings. While a “communal” organization may host such events, its primary purpose is to function as a consistent, dependable group, where members can ask for help if they need it and take advantage of learning a new skill when offered – much like a typical church does for its congregants. The Houston Oasis is a prime example of such an organization: they do host dinners and happy hours like those described in the preceding section, but they also strive to be an enduring community that fosters a sense of belonging among nonbelievers. Someone looking for a close-knit secular community (perhaps filling a void left from leaving a church, though not necessarily) might be drawn to Oasis for this reason over a group like Houston Atheists. (However, this should not suggest that people involved exclusively in social organizations like HA cannot forge deep connections; indeed, some people I spoke to had developed close friendships or met their spouses at such events.)

These organizations can be especially appealing to young couples and families with small children, who are looking for like-minded and similarly situated people to share experiences and build relationships that will extend beyond the events hosted by the organization. These are, of course, also functions that are performed by churches and other intimate communities. During an interview, Alayna discussed the significant role church played in her life, and how difficult it was to give up when she began questioning her faith:

Honestly, the last thing that was holding me back from fully admitting that I didn't believe in God, was the concept of community... I need church, I need a community that has my back even if I don't know these people, right? Because I'm part of their community, they're gonna step up and help me, or they're gonna be there for me and they're gonna create a sense of home for my children. Because it did that for me as a child. Church was a really fun place for me. I loved church, I loved the friends I had at church, I loved the sports I played through church. And I was really afraid of saying I'm not gonna be part of a church anymore.... Once I realized that I could have community without God, I was gone.
While some founders, leaders, and members of organizations like Oasis do not wish to be compared to a church, others, like Alayna, recognize and appreciate the similarities. Weekly Oasis events, for example, mimic the structure of a church service. They meet every Sunday morning for coffee, cookies, music (performances, not sing-a-longs), and a lecture, sometimes given by a member of the community but often given by outside speakers. When no speaker is scheduled in advance, a presentation is given by Mike Aus: co-founder, executive director, and de facto leader of Oasis. They offer childcare during the meeting (some even call it a “service”) and pass around hats to collect donations. They host family friendly events, happy hours, and discussion groups. They are a 501(c)(3) educational non-profit organization, with a salaried executive director and a board of directors.

Oasis was also working toward building a “directory of skills” that would list select group members alongside their professions or services they were able and willing to perform for other members. If, for instance, someone at Oasis needed a dentist, an electrician, or childcare, they could consult the directory and enlist the services of a fellow community member before resorting to outside recommendations. Similarly, churches – particularly those catering to immigrant and minority populations – often provide their congregations with basic resources beyond spiritual fulfillment (Cadge and Ecklund 2007; Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Having the option of relying on other group members for everyday (even trivial) needs can help foster a sense of affinity among nonbelievers that churches have successfully provided their congregations for generations.

Oasis was appealing to Alayna precisely because it shared these characteristics – both significant and trivial – with her conception of “church,” not in spite of them. For many formerly religious nonbelievers, church is synonymous with community, and a nonreligious organization’s ability to mimic these qualities can provide familiarity and comfort.

4.3 Educational

Several of Houston’s nonreligious organizations could be categorized as educational. While some members do become involved to meet social needs, others say they are looking for “something more”; they want to learn something new or engage intellectually in structured discussions. At these types of events, members can learn about and debate the philosophical merits of atheism and shortcomings of religion, hold discussions about science, ethics, or social issues, or acquire new perspectives from outsider groups, like the LGBTQ or Black communities. The organizations may host lectures and presentations (given by community
members or guest speakers) or advertise outside events of interest. These types of gatherings were the most popular among nonreligious organizations, and nearly all of the organizations I observed hosted educational events; even groups that did not host these types of events, like HA and Spiritual Naturalists, often promoted those hosted by other organizations on their Meetup and Facebook pages. Organizations specifically prioritizing these events, thus displaying an educational identity most prominently, include Humanists of Houston, Greater Houston Skeptic Society, Houston Black Nonbelievers, and Houston Church of Freethought (despite its tongue-in-cheek name, I categorize the HCoF as an educational organization rather than a communal one, as its events tend to focus less on community building and more on intellectual stimulation).

While the nonbelievers I observed were not always keen on restricting casual conversations to religion and nonbelief, educational events frequently dealt with these topics. For example, sociologist Penny Edgell gave a talk at Rice University, where she presented data from the new wave of the American Mosaic Project, discussing new and persistent trends among atheists and the unaffiliated. She was joined by Anthony Pinn, a Black professor of religion at Rice and author of the book *Writing God’s Obituary: How A Good Methodist Became an Even Better Atheist*. This event was hosted by the university, but was promoted by several nonreligious organizations, including HA, HOH, and HBN. Pinn has also made appearances as an invited speaker at some of Houston’s local nonreligious gatherings.

Topics up for discussion at these types of events varied widely. Sometimes educational events dealt with scientific topics, such as a talk hosted by GHSS about conservation programs at the Houston Zoo. Other times these events focused on social issues, like HBN’s discussions about mass incarceration and homophobia in the Black community. Ethical concerns were also a popular topic of discussion, perhaps because nonbelievers are often assumed to lack a moral compass (Gervais et al. 2011; Zuckerman 2009). For example, early in my fieldwork Oasis began holding a monthly discussion group focused on ethical issues, such as the death penalty, euthanasia, and organ transplantation. As Mike Aus, former pastor and co-founder of Oasis, said preceding a Sunday morning lecture, “There’s so much to talk about when you’re not limited to one book.”

### 4.4 Political

Another role these organizations can play is a political one: they can offer events that focus on raising awareness of church/state issues and providing members knowledge and access to political channels. Such events might aim to incite
change in policies that could be interpreted as favoring religious individuals and institutions, perhaps going so far as to initiate lawsuits challenging such policies. For example, the Houston chapter of Americans United tries to host an event every quarter. One of these events featured a discussion with Ellery Schempp, plaintiff in the 1963 Supreme Court case *Abington School District v. Schempp*, which banned mandatory Bible readings in public schools. However, AU is not a nonreligious organization in the sense that other organizations discussed here are. It was founded in 1947 by Protestant Christians and caters to both the religious and nonreligious who wish to see a government free from religious influence (and religion free from government influence). Many of my respondents spoke of the separation of church and state as a cause that can be supported by believers and nonbelievers alike, an idea supported by social research (Baker and Smith 2009). Still, AU events are promoted by several of Houston’s nonreligious organizations for those members who are passionate about issues tying together politics and secularism.

Such organizations can also encourage political activism, or promote events that highlight secular, political causes (see Fazzino, Borer, and Abdel Haq 2014). For example, there was a recurring protest that HOH had been hosting with Amnesty International, in which members met in front of the Saudi Arabian consulate to protest the treatment of Raif Badawi, a liberal blogger who was sentenced to 10 years in prison and 1,000 lashes for posting critical comments about Islam in Saudi Arabia. Another prominent issue plaguing secular Texans during my fieldwork involved the injection of religion into public classrooms: group members angrily spoke of a new history textbook the state was considering adopting, which cited Moses as an honorary Founding Father of the US.

Respondents often reported being frustrated with this kind of infusion of religion and public life, both at home and abroad. They spoke of seeking an outlet for such frustrations, but were also cynical about the efficacy of actions like protesting and petitioning. However, I did recognize at least 30 people from Houston who made the 165 mile drive to Austin for the second annual Texas Secular Convention, an entire weekend of talks on church/state issues specifically facing the citizens of Texas, which hosted panels and presentations with titles such as “The Importance of Secular Education,” “Staying in Contact with Your Legislator,” and “Effective Ways to Build Coalitions Between Progressive Religious and Secular Communities.”
4.5 Charitable

Nonreligious organizations might be primarily concerned with charitable endeavors, such as providing opportunities to donate and volunteer as individuals or as members of a nonreligious community. Groups like HOH and Oasis hosted at least one charitable event each month (e.g., volunteering at local food banks, donation centers, and hosting blood drives), and members of these organizations often participated in monthly giveaways with Atheists Helping the Homeless, a group launched in Austin, Texas, in 2009 that had recently started a chapter in Houston. However, many nonbelievers I interviewed expressed a desire to see more activities like this, and lamented that there were too few opportunities to volunteer with nonreligious organizations. In fact, they recognized that religious groups often do charity very well, and some respondents even volunteered through churches or religious organizations simply because many charities have religious affiliations.

Some members of nonreligious organizations also recognized that disadvantaged nonbelievers might hesitate to obtain services from religious charities, especially if the recipient perceives an expectation to attend the church or somehow become involved with the religious group. Felicia, a member of Houston Black Nonbelievers, said:

[A fellow HBN member] and I talked about the plight of the homeless. You know, a lot of these shelters around here are Christian-based, you know, it’s that beat-you-over-the-head-till-you-become-a-Christian, whether you are or not, and he would like something secular. Now if you wanna go to church or whatever, that’s your business, we’re not gonna proselytize. And he said, “I’m pretty sure there’s some atheists out there but they have to say they’re Christian in order to get services.” I said yeah, I’m pretty sure there are.

Not only are secular charities important in that they provide nonbelievers in need a place to go without religious strings attached, but nonreligious organizations that endorse charitable activity can also mitigate the impression that atheists are immoral or indifferent to helping other people. For instance, on our way to the Texas Secular Convention in Austin, Rose, an active member of GHSS, spoke to me about a conversation she had with a religious acquaintance. After describing volunteer work she had recently completed, the acquaintance responded, “Why do you bother volunteering if you don’t believe in God?” This gave Rose the opportunity to explain that nonbelievers can be moral individuals who enjoy helping others, with no promise of an afterlife in return. By volunteering specifically as part of a nonreligious organization, nonbelievers are engaging in a sort of secular activism that aims to dispel these negative assumptions (see Fazzino, Borer, and Abdel Haq 2014; Zuckerman 2014).
4.6 Spiritual

Finally, these organizations can be *spiritual* in nature, providing a place where members can go to experience emotions traditionally associated with religion – like awe and self-reflection – where disbelief in the supernatural is not only acceptable (as it often is in Unitarian Universalist congregations), but expected. While “secular spirituality” might seem counterintuitive, there are a sizable number of people in these organizations who feel that the idea is compatible with an atheist or humanist worldview. For example, when I asked one of my respondents, Robert, if he thought there was room for spirituality in an atheistic worldview, he gave this enthusiastic response:

> When the light bulb burns out it’s gone, and it’s sad. Sort of. But it’s also kind of awesome because I’m not gonna live forever. I get this one chance to eat ice cream and be with people I love and check out sunsets and visit Canada, and it’s great. Is there room for spirituality? Yes. I meditate, that helped me get off drugs. There’s room to hold someone’s hand and say, you know, I’m just thankful you’re in my life and I really love you and I’m really thankful you’re my friend, I’m thankful you’re my sister, I’m thankful for all these different things... if that’s prayer, then that’s prayer.... And there’s also room for being crass and there’s room for the banal as well. The sacred and the profane. I need both of those things. I need comedy clubs where I can go and shout obscenities, and I need moments were I can reflect on just how awesome it is that I exist.

Though Robert and several other respondents spoke of spirituality in a way that did not conflict with their non-belief, most of them did not actually attend events that specifically catered to spiritual nonbelievers. Indeed, of all the types described here, spiritual events struggled the most to maintain a critical mass of nonbelievers to justify continuing meetings. One group in Houston dedicated to secular spirituality, Spiritual Naturalists, operated on and off for several years. They resumed operations in the form of a bi-weekly meditation session and philosophy talk in March of 2015, only to disband four months later, claiming that instead of this “official organization” the group should have focused on allowing a “grassroots community to emerge organically.” The group now operates via newsletters and a mailing list, announcing events of interest in the Houston area and allowing members to connect on their own terms.

This lack of participation may be due to the personal meanings that respondents attached to the idea of spirituality. In fact, research has suggested that while people interpret religiosity as incorporating the institutional aspects associated with religious belief, they interpret spirituality as being more individualistic (Zinnbauer et al. 1997); secular spirituality may be interpreted similarly. Not all nonbelievers are comfortable using the term “spirituality,” and it seems to
be an idiosyncratic concept in that its meaning varies from individual to individual. Some nonbelievers associated spirituality with meditation, and chose to meditate on their own terms (some with a meditation group, or even at a Buddhist temple) as opposed to specifically meditating with other nonbelievers. When my interview respondents spoke of spirituality and asked them to explain what they meant when they used the word, they tended to define it either in terms of mindfulness and awareness, such as a realization of being a part of “something bigger than ourselves” (usually defined in a literal, scientific way, i.e., “nature” or “the universe”), or a desire to strive toward self-improvement. Zuckerman (2014) coined the term “awe-ism” to describe feelings of wonder that several of my own respondents expressed.

5 Conclusion

During her talk at Rice University, Penny Edgell suggested that public attitudes toward nonbelievers will be difficult to sway until the full range of diversity in the nonreligious community is exposed. Americans make broad, negative assumptions about nonbelievers (which have not greatly improved since the first wave of the American Mosaic Project in 2003), viewing them as immoral and un-American. These perceptions persist, despite the fact that people who claim them do not report personally knowing anyone who does not believe in God (Edgell et al. 2006); thus, the stigma attached to atheism often goes unchallenged. People may assume that nonreligious organizations exist solely for the purpose of criticizing religion – in fact, I spoke to several nonbelievers who also made these assumptions about nonreligious groups before attending themselves. Although these organizations do provide nonbelievers an outlet for venting frustrations about the prevalence of religion in everyday life, I witnessed relatively little outright hostility toward religious individuals. Many respondents reported harboring no ill feelings toward believers, some acknowledged the good that religious communities can do, and a few even empathized with those who do believe in God. Research that exposes the diversity of beliefs, behaviors, and values among the nonreligious (like that described throughout this volume) has the potential to change negative perceptions held by the general American public.

This chapter is derived from a larger project focusing on this diversity in nonreligious communities, including whether individuals with certain preferences or experiences are drawn to one type of group over another; the role organizations play in helping individuals construct and manage their personal identities; and whether organizational involvement helps to instill a set of positive beliefs, val-
ues, or characteristics that accompanies what it means to be a nonbeliever. I also suggest that individuals can shift and alter the characteristics of the organizations they join. In a span of only eight months, I saw these organizations grow and dissolve and change. Much like with individuals, organizational identity is not static. In fact, some organization theorists suggest that organizations need to be more flexible than individuals in how they define themselves because they must be able to adapt quickly in order to survive precarious social, political, or economic conditions (Gioia 1998; Gioia, Schultz, and Corley 2000). The Humanists of Houston provides a good example of such a shift. Since coming under new leadership in 2015, HOH has become a multi-faceted organization, offering its own social, educational, political, and charitable activities, and co-sponsoring or promoting events hosted by nearly all other nonreligious organizations in the Houston area (for more on how nonreligious organizations can support one another, see Fazzino and Cragun, this volume). While I categorize HOH as an educational organization, as its most popular events fall under this umbrella, the organization’s shifting focus on building a humanist community – that is, a close-knit group of core active members – means HOH could be shifting its most salient identity toward becoming a communal organization, rather than a predominately educational one.

The organizational types described above serve an important purpose in nonreligious communities, especially to those individuals who have lost their faith and left their own religious communities (Fazzino 2014). Nonreligious organizations are very much like religious organizations in the functions they provide their members. Religious organizations have historically provided a space for their members to socialize, learn new things, engage in political discourse, volunteer, reflect and meditate, and build enduring relationships. Of course, religious organizations are not the only way to meet these needs and goals (nor are nonreligious organizations the only alternative), but they have arguably been the most successful. Providing a space for nonbelievers to have these fundamental human experiences is vital, especially in a society that overwhelmingly values the religious ethos. Despite religion’s declining influence as a social institution over other areas of social life, scholars recognize that it remains significant in American society. Nonreligious organizations like those described in this chapter will likely continue to grow unless (or until) religion becomes such a trivial part of everyday public life that nonreligious organizations – that are nonreligious by design – no longer need to exist.
Bibliography


