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To the Prairie Atheists, Maple Street Baptist Church, Chicagoland secular groups and Lake Church

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores “practical definitions” of religion. A practical definition of religion is how social actors act, refrain from acting, and understand their actions in relation to religion in practice and across various contexts. The project also engages with themes of cognitive sociology, especially how sociologists can best incorporate data on cognition into their studies. It accomplishes these complementary tasks through a multi-sited ethnography of four separate communities: atheists and evangelical Christians in Oklahoma and Chicago. Using a set of mixed methods incorporating participant observation, in-depth interviews, and field experiments, it finds that practical definitions of religion change depending on who interacts with religion and how the interactions take place.

Chapter 1 outlines the general theoretical framework of the project. Chapter 2 shows how some evangelicals situationally reject the label of “religious” in order to redirect the conversation over what it means to be Christian. However, data from timed field experiments measuring dual-process cognition, in combination with traditional qualitative methods, suggest that despite rejecting “religion” these evangelicals cannot entirely disassociate themselves from the everyday notion of religion as a social category. More generally, the chapter explores the place of dual-process theory within sociology and suggests ways to collect sociologically useful data on dual-process cognition.

Chapter 3 draws on a card-sorting field experiment to examine how people understood the shape of the field of religions. Overall, the chapter suggests that people’s conceptions of religion are deeply intertwined with their understandings of a religion’s politics as well as highly dependent on who they define as potential “allies” and “adversaries.”

Chapter 4 investigates how aspects of group self-concept influence group humor styles. Drawing on participant observation with atheists in Oklahoma and evangelicals in Chicago, it shows that group humor styles are a function of how groups think of themselves, think of key outsiders, and who is present in a given interaction. This process helps explain why some religious minority groups, such as atheists in Oklahoma, have a culture of biting and potentially offensive humor directed at outsiders, while other religious minority groups, like evangelicals in Chicago, use much milder humor that is focused on their own group.

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: WHAT I TALK ABOUT WHEN I TALK ABOUT RELIGION

I relaxed on a faux leather sofa and looked around the waiting room. The space, located just outside a hallway of pastors' offices, was very pleasant. The furniture appeared solid and professional, while large glass windows let in copious amounts of natural light. The receptionist's desk was decorated with a variety of plants, and a homey fabric cover hid the cord leading from the wall to her phone. Shelves erected next to her desk held personal photos as well as five large wooden block letters that spelled out "GRACE."

I waited less than five minutes before Mike Wagner arrived for our meeting.[1] Mike was a white man about forty years old. His head was shaved bald and a small blond goatee sat like a punctuation mark on his chin. He walked in wearing a jean jacket, and at first glance, he looked more like an aging hipster than an associate pastor of a large Southern Baptist church. Mike led me back to his office where we could talk.

The two of us sat chatting for about an hour around a small glass table. At some point during our conversation I mentioned that I had heard how some Christians had begun expressing reservations about the word religion itself. A little later, Mike returned to this point. *I want to come back to what you said about religion, how some people say it's just relationships,* he started.[2] *But I don't want to get rid of the word religion. James 1:27 says exactly what religion is.* When I told him I was not familiar with the passage, he quoted it from memory. *The religion*

[1] Names of individuals and organizations are pseudonyms unless otherwise noted.
[2] Throughout this work I distinguish between quotations reported verbatim, usually based on transcripts from recorded interviews, and quotations from ethnographic fieldnotes, which rely more heavily on memory. Only quotations from transcribed interviews appear between quotation marks. Quotations from fieldnotes written based on my recollection of events are designated by italics; quotations from interviews are denoted by italics contained within quotation marks. Direct quotations are presented here verbatim except for minor editing to allow for ease of reading (Luhrmann 2012).

of our Father is to look after orphans and widows in their distress. That's what religion is. To look after the orphans. I was surprised at how quick he was to explicitly define the term, and I wondered the degree to which other members of his church would agree with him. A little later, he mused about what detractors of religion might think. *Some people say religion is a crutch. Well, that might be true. But we all have things that we lean on, things that help us. There's nothing wrong with that.*

A few months later I dropped by a Halloween party organized by a local atheist organization. A woman from the group lived in a mobile home that sat on a large piece of property outside the city. She had volunteered to host the event and built a large bonfire for people to huddle around during the evening. Plentiful food and drink were available on a table next to a small horse stable a couple dozen yards away from the fire. Not everyone present was in costume, but across the fire I saw a clown, nun, priest, and a hippy sitting together in a row of folding chairs. Others, some in costume and some wearing their regular clothes, milled about talking.

I ended up in a conversation with Brad, a white man in his mid-thirties who this evening was dressed like a character from the film American Psycho, and John, a white man in his fifties who, while not in costume, got into the spirit of things by spending much of his time at the party roasting marshmallows on a long stick over the fire. The three of us talked about a church event that we had all attended along with several other atheists from the group just a few days prior. The somewhat unusual occurrence of a group of atheists going to church *en masse* came about when a local congregation hosted a weekend full of lectures on creationism. The event featured an outside expert on the subject and was publicized with large banners near a major road on the

edge of the church campus. When it became known that the first night's talk was entitled "Atheism's Attack on America," several members of the local atheist organization decided to make the lecture an official outing for the group. Next to the fire at the Halloween party, John took an introspective position on the church conference and why it appealed to the Christians who had attended. *I try and think about why people believe what they do,* he said. Then, referring to religion and religious people in general, he added, *It's like a drug addict but with ideas. Our bodies dispense drugs to us, like dopamine and serotonin, via ideas. "I'm saved! Oh, that feels good!" Asking someone to give that up is just like telling an addict to stop drinking or doing drugs. Fuck you! They'll say.*

Most Sunday mornings I attended an adult Sunday school class at a Southern Baptist church followed by a worship service. I had been away for a few months, however, teaching and doing research in Illinois. This was the first Sunday I was back, and it was good to see my friends again. The room was crowded that morning, with around twenty-five or thirty people in attendance. Most were white, in their late twenties to mid-forties, and almost everyone was there along with his or her spouse. Like every other Sunday, people trickled in the room slowly and stood around chatting informally with each other, much like at a cocktail party or a reception, until the class's leaders finally got around to herding people to their chairs in preparation for the official program. This particular class at the church was notorious for beginning late and not sticking to the official schedule like the other groups.

Today, once our leaders Wesley and Melanie finally got things started, they announced that the theme for the next several weeks would be what it means to follow Christ. Wesley and Melanie were both around forty, married, and they had organized this class together for several

years. After watching a short humorous YouTube video on "the Gospel if it had been told on Twitter," Wesley broke us up into smaller groups to discuss a list of questions concerning the day's topic. My group contemplated together what it meant to follow Christ and, through the discussion, reinforced the informal theology of the class. Towards the end of our time together that morning, a man named Sean shared his thoughts about people who had given up on following Christ. *People who stop following Jesus, I don't think they ever really tried. They might've tried church, or religion, but not following Christ.*

The Problem: What do people mean when they talk about "religion?"

These three short vignettes offer a tiny glimpse of some of the variety of ways people in the United States talk about, understand, and relate to this thing we call "religion." Religion is one of those slippery categories that is at the same time extremely simple and yet exceedingly complex. On one hand, the word itself is part of our everyday language. Its meaning, as well as the meaning of related words like "religious," is usually clear. For example, we know that, whatever their differences, things like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, and Buddhism, among others, are examples of what falls into the category of religion. Likewise, when a friend tells you that a particular person is religious, you probably have a pretty good idea of what your friend means.[3] This commonplace notion of the religious also extends to the physical spaces that we encounter every day. Generally, a church is considered a religious place; a bank is not. Those experts who study religion, even though they often disagree, are also able to make claims about religion that seem obvious in their meaning. Surveys, for example, tell us that Republicans are

[3] Unless, of course, you are a sociologist, anthropologist, religious studies scholar, or other such person who has trouble taking statements like this at face value.

more likely to be religious. Secularization theory promises that religion is on the decline, while the idea that higher levels of educational attainment is associated with certain religious denominations is taken for granted. At first glance there seems to be some fairly obvious, unproblematic, and dare I say "common sense" notions of religion that include what it is, who it affects, where it is found, and what it does.

When looking at things more closely, however, this clarity begins to blur, if only slightly at first. For example, consider the stories above: Mike focused on religion as something that helps those in need; John understood religion as a drug that makes people feel good but leaves them addicted; and Sean pointed towards what he saw as a difference between religion and following Christ, which for him (as will be shown later) are two separate things for some people that can at times be poles apart. In important ways, each had a slightly different idea of what religion *really is* and also implicitly different understandings of not only what it does but also where the boundaries between religion and other categories lie. Mike sees religion as something that is not confined to a single space such as a church and that takes place in one's daily life, while Sean sees Christ-following in much the same way. In these perspectives, there are few or no boundaries between religion and other social spheres. John and other atheists like him, on the other hand, are much more likely to take a view that things like churches and prayer are religious but that much of everyday life outside these settings is not.

On top of the variation between particular individuals' ideas concerning religion is also the fact that religion is one of those things that is very difficult to explicitly define. If asked, it can be hard to quickly come up with a strict definition of what religion really is, even if one still has a sense of what belongs and what does not belong to the category, at least for the "obvious" things, like a church or a Torah. In many ways the situation is analogous to how Supreme Court

Justice Potter Stewart talked about defining obscenities in his well-known 1964 opinion in *Jacobellis v. Ohio*. "I shall not today attempt further to define the kinds of material I understand to be embraced within that shorthand description; and perhaps I could never succeed in intelligibly doing so. But I know it when I see it." Like Justice Stewart and obscenities, we might not be able to define religion explicitly, but most people know it when they see it—whatever "it" is.

In this way religion resembles cultural categories like art, race, and politics, among others. We know them when we see them. In practice, of course, different people see different things and then experience their acts of knowing differently as well. My father, for example, thinks that a Rothko painting, consisting of broad and seemingly simple swaths of color, is not really art. Yet there it hangs in the art museum, so at least some people think otherwise (Bourdieu 1993). It has been shown that what is considered political in practice depends on a variety of factors (Eliasoph 1998), as does the meanings of race in everyday conversations (Bell and Hartmann 2007). Likewise, Scientology only "officially" achieved the status of a religion in the United States when the Internal Revenue Service classified it as such in 1993 (Smith 2004; Urban 2011). Many people still mockingly refer to it as a cult, and it is officially classified as a dangerous cult in some European countries to this day (Hexham and Poewe 1999; Palmer 2008). In practice, what counts as art, politics, or religion is highly contested with different groups, each living out their own version of these categories.

Social science, unfortunately, has often avoided investigating head-on these simultaneous differences of perception between particular individuals and groups in regards to religion. Perhaps what is religious has often appeared just as obvious and uncontested to most scholars as it does to ordinary people. From the early founding fathers of the "scientific" study of religion

onwards, scholars have, however, spilled oceans of ink trying to say what religion *really is*, as if it were a physical object that you can see, touch, and measure. These arguments never left much room for the possibility that there could be multiple competing conceptions of religion within a particular social space. Well-known definitions of religion include those by Durkheim (1995 [1912]), Geertz (1973), James (1994 [1902]), Stark and Bainbridge (1987), Tylor (1891) and so on. Critiques eventually arose stating that defining religion is impossible (Asad 1993) at the same time that others argued that defining it was an absolute necessity (Riesebrodt 2010). In the field of religious studies, scholars examined the history of the category of religion, at least in the sense of its intellectual and discursive history (Asad 1993; Fitzgerald 2000; Masuzawa 2005; McCutcheon 1997; Smith 2004). In sociology, debates in this area concentrated on the kind of definition, functional or substantive, that was most appropriate (Berger 1974; see also Griel and Bromley 2003; Riesebrodt 2010). In practice, most scholars studying religion today almost entirely sidestep questions of what religion is by relegating any explicit definitions to endnotes or, at the most, a sentence in the introduction of a work.

Important exceptions to this general trend, however, began to surface with increasing frequency over the last two decades. Several scholars from a variety of fields, including sociology, anthropology, political science, and religious studies, have conducted studies that shed light on the way that the categories of religion are created by actors on the ground, as well as how these differing versions of religion can shift between various actors and even among individual actors in practice (e.g., Ammerman 2007; Bender 2003, 2010; Besecke 2005; Engelke 2012; Hall 1997; Hirschkind 2006; Hurd 2008; Lichterman 2008; Mahmood 2005; Orsi 2005;

Smilde 2006; Sullivan 2005, 2009).[4] In such scholarship, for example, we see that Jews who do not belong to a synagogue experience their religion either as a choice or as an ascribed identity depending on the circumstances (Davidman 2007); we find that competing notions of what constitutes religious practice in a cemetery are being "settled" by courts of law (Sullivan 2005); and it becomes quickly clear that common place notions like the dichotomy between the religious and the secular are multifaceted and contradictory on the world stage (Hurd 2008). Most often, scholars interested in these kinds of nuances do not explicitly frame their work in terms of what religion *is* to groups of people and instead focus on concepts such as everyday religion, lived religion, religion-making, and varieties of secularism. All of these concepts, however, share a common concern for contextualizing different forms of religion as found in daily life. Through these works it has become clear that religion is not the same thing to all people at all times and that this variation is important to understand if we are to truly comprehend religion, the spiritual and the secular, in societies around the world.

Definitions thus hold a strange place within the sociological study of religion. When sociologists consider definitions of religion at all, they usually do so from their own etic scholarly perspective and to meet practical needs.[5] Religion is defined in order to delimitate the object of study. While commonly accepted functional definitions, like the one proposed by Geertz (1973), open up a wide range of phenomena to potential investigation as "religious," a scholar's use of even broad, functionally-based conceptions of religion is primarily a way of saying, "I study *this*, and not *that.*" At the same time, what religion is to the people we study and

[4] The list of scholars cited here is not exhaustive but illustrates the approaches that have been most influential in my own thinking about these issues.
[5] Of course, it is debatable how etic the perspective of most people, sociologists included, can ever be as they come to the table with their own preconceived notions and experiences involving religion.

where its boundaries lie are not usually an integral part of the conversation and are more or less taken for granted. This status quo is perhaps most easily observable in survey research, although this is not the only place where it happens. The General Social Survey (GSS) straightforwardly asks, for example, about the relationships between religion and American society. One particular GSS question explored this topic by probing the extent to which people agree with the following statement: "The U.S. would be a better country if religion had less influence" (Smith et al. 2011). Yet remember the competing ways that Mike, John, and Sean conceive of religion and consider how each person's perspective might affect their answer. John, the atheist who equated religion with drug addiction, would probably agree with the GSS statement; Mike, who saw religion as something that helps those in need, would likely disagree. But the position of Sean, the man who distinguished between religion and following Christ, remains unclear. Would Sean understand religion in the colloquial sense and agree that we need more of it? Or would he stick to his convictions and insist that "religion" is a problem but Christ-following, which is not religion, should be increased?

This situation leaves us in a dilemma. We ask often questions like the one from the GSS despite the fact that we know that this thing called "religion" is a vague abstraction and that precisely how people think about religion can change in different circumstances, as shown by the scholars of everyday religion referenced above. In other words, because of the inherent ambiguity of the category of religion, it is not only likely that different people have different understandings of what religion "is," but that any single person will understand religion differently in different contexts. Sean might well understand what the GSS is asking of him in a survey setting and agree that religion's influence should be increased, but then later, when talking with the members of his Sunday school class, say the exact opposite. Pretending that

these differences do not exist misses much of the significance of religion in real-world settings. How different groups understand the category of religion thus becomes a central problem for the study of religion itself.

This ambiguity, and specifically our lack of understanding of it, is much more than an obscure scholarly debate. Inattention to competing definitions of religion makes it difficult to analyze religion and its place in many current controversies, including those surrounding electoral politics (e.g,. perceived and actual religious positions of major candidates like Barack Obama and Mitt Romney), international relations (e.g., the United States and the politics of the Middle East), and healthcare funding (e.g., paying for contraception). Controversies associated with the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act in particular draw attention to some of the variations in the boundaries of religion present in the United States. One way to interpret the positions of the various parties in the Supreme Court case *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* is as an argument over the content and boundaries of the category of religion. The owners of the national craft store chain Hobby Lobby argued that their business activities were essentially a religious enterprise deserving protection under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act of 1993, while the government viewed commercial businesses like Hobby Lobby as something fundamentally different from religion (cf. Sullivan 2014). The Supreme Court, as we now know, endorsed Hobby Lobby's interpretation by a slim margin. As this and many other similar cases illustrate, we can only truly understand public debates involving religion if we understand the contours of what results when people call something religion and how religion's referents may change systematically across social contexts.

"Practical definitions"

I suggest a remedy to our lack of knowledge on the shapes of religion as a cultural category through investigating what I call the "practical definitions" of religion in different groups. A practical definition of religion consists of the content of what a particular social actor in practice considers to be religion and religious, the boundaries between religion and non-religion, and the variation of the content and boundaries of religion across different social contexts. A practical definition of religion can be thought of as religion and its referents as they are situated in particular social spaces. Practical definitions of religion are not necessarily guides that an individual uses for action, consciously or otherwise, but are rather inductive descriptions of emic practices and discourses that a researcher uses for heuristic purposes. They are practical in the sense that we see them best in practice—that is, we see them in the actual actions of individuals and groups. To ask about the practical definition of religion is to ask about the following:

1) *Content:* What is the content of what a social actor considers religion, as opposed to spiritual or the secular? Returning to John, who identifies as an atheist, when we later sat down for an interview he told me many things that revealed the characteristics that he associated with religion. Referring to how September 11th affected him, for example, he explained, *"I started thinking, you know, this religion thing is really a problem. The people flying those planes, they're doing it because they believed in – you know, they had religious fervor and they had people telling them what to do based on it."* This tells us that John, at least within the context of September 11th and our interview, sees religion as something that can create a kind of irrational zeal that makes people susceptible to the influence of others, even when those others direct them

to do terrible things. For him, religion is something that is a problem in society that needs to be addressed.

2) Boundaries: What are the boundaries between religion, the spiritual and the secular, for a particular social actor? Where are the boundaries between the domains of the religious and other areas, such as politics? Wesley, one of the leaders of the adult Sunday school in Oklahoma, saw a local controversy over placing a monument to the Ten Commandments on the grounds of the Oklahoma State Capitol as a political issue, not a religious one. *"I mean, from a Biblical standpoint it's just embarrassing. I feel like we're trying to win a political battle, and I mean scripture tells just that we're not in a war of flesh and blood."* For him, placing the Ten Commandments on public property was something that existed primarily in the political realm in contrast to other things that he felt were more closely related to actually following Christ.

3) *Variation*: What variation exists in the content and boundaries of religion across context for the social actor? There were many indications that particular individuals saw religion differently in different settings. For example, Cameron, an extremely vocal atheist in Oklahoma, once mentioned a desire to attend a local Unitarian church. When the church came up in conversation during a group lunch he mentioned seriously, *I would go, but my wife doesn't want to get up that early…. They're also a little more religious than I'm comfortable with. Not so humanist and more religious.* Cameron's willingness to attend Unitarian church services, even if they were "a little too religious," stands in stark contrast to feelings he often expressed about other faiths and denominations.

Thus a practical definition of religion is not a general definition of what religion really "is" in the sense that the classic definitions, like those of Geertz or Durkheim, attempted to define religion universally. Instead, *a practical definition of religion is a description of how social*

actors act, or refrain from acting, as well as understand what they are doing and understand what they have done, in practice and across various contexts, in regards to religion. If we continued the exercise, we would find that other people's practical definitions differ from those referenced above. There is, in fact, an almost limitless universe to what potential practical definitions of religion could be. These conceptions of religion are not fixed, but fluid across time, place, and social context. Remember that Sean may define his Christ-following as a religious practice in terms of the GSS survey and still define it as a nonreligious practice elsewhere.

Conceiving of how people approach a category like religion using the concept of practical definitions has several advantages. It moves the focus from etic definitions imposed by scholars to emic notions of religion. It also acknowledges the messiness that we see in everyday life surrounding contested cultural categories. Finally, since it is assumed that practical definitions are shaped by a variety of social forces, it allows us to ask further questions about the practical definitions themselves, most importantly how the definitions are shaped by factors like religious identity and setting. Do the very categories of "religious," "spiritual," and "secular" only emerge given certain practical problems, such as attributing motivations, determining jurisdictions, and making alliances? How does religious identity affect practical definitions of religion? In what ways does the context, or setting, in which attributions of religion take place influence practical definitions of religion? Setting is thought of here broadly on three levels:

1) Religious ambiance (general context): How does the ambient religion affect how social actors view the category of religion? Ambient religion is a term that describes the processes affecting how and what versions of religion become public or stay private (Engelke 2012).[6] It

[6] Engelke (2012) originally called this concept "ambient faith," but I have modified it to ambient religion.

describes the religious "mood" of a setting and is created by actors in practice and in response to both other actors and the existing ambient religion itself. Imagine the ambient religion of the small town depicted in the film Footloose (i.e., a conservative protestant Christian ethos permeating public life) versus the ambient religion of the Godfather (i.e., people are publicly Catholic yet privately seemingly uninfluenced by religion). The ambient religion of these two settings are very different. Presumably, if the fictional characters in one film could enter the world of the other they would immediately feel this difference viscerally in their interactions. They would sense that the religious "mood" had changed tone and temperament.

2) Institutional context (mid-level context): How do organizational settings affect how social actors view the category of religion? Different organizations and organizational forms may influence how those who interact with the organization conceive of religion. John and the other atheists who often attend meetings of his organized atheist group may come to understand religion differently than someone else who considers herself an atheist but does not attend atheist meetings, or from someone who attends a different kind of atheist organization. In addition to the overall ambient religion, it seems likely that interactions with specific intuitions explicitly and implicitly enacting particular practical definitions would influence those who come into contact with them in a variety of ways.

3) Specific situational context (micro-context): How do a social actor's own experiences with religion (i.e., personal religious history) affect how actors view the category of religion? How do specific interactions, including their cognitive contexts, shape how actors view the category of religion? For example, Brad, the atheist who was also in the conversation with John by the Halloween party fire, understands religion through his own history of interaction with the religious as shaped by being raised in a relatively secular household yet growing up surrounded

by religious friends and neighbors. Also, as will be discussed in detail below, human cognition is highly dependent on context, and this variation likely affects how people interact with the category of religion. Might Brad express one practical definition of religion during an interview with a researcher but another during more quotidian interactions in his daily life?

The concept of practical definitions of religion thus builds on the work of those interested in everyday religious practices but focuses it on directly confronting the processes involved with forming various understandings of religion in the United States. The goal is to develop a sense of the varying conceptions of religion present in our society and to investigate the processes that lead some groups to view religion one way or another.

Atheists and evangelicals: a study in practical definitions

In order to focus on the underlying processes involved in creating practical definitions of religion, this project explores the issue among two very different groups: "active" self-identified atheists and evangelical Christians.[7] These particular groups of people were chosen for reasons of comparative logic and practicality. Atheists are a useful population within which to study practical definitions of religion because, somewhat paradoxically, atheists in groups tend to spend a lot of time talking about religion. Also, as most atheists tend to have fairly negative views towards religion, they are useful for highlighting, for comparative purposes, one particular extreme in the set of practical definitions of religion in the United States. Evangelicals were selected as a point of comparison to the atheists because of the very prominent and public role that evangelical Christianity has played in the American religious imagination over the last

[7] Following Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006), and LeDrew (2013) I use the term "active atheists" to refer to atheists who are members of or who regularly interact with atheist organizations.

several decades. Additionally, it has been argued that it was the coupling of conservative evangelical Christianity to Republican politics that was one of the main factors responsible for the large increase of religiously unaffiliated that has taken place since the 1990s (Hout and Fischer 2002, 2014). This suggests, and is confirmed by this project, that at least from the perspective of atheists, conservative evangelical Protestants and atheists are near polar opposites on an imagined religious spectrum running from no religion to very religious.[8]

In order to better understand the effects of differing ambient religious environments, research sites were selected in very different locations: a metropolitan area in Oklahoma and Chicago, Illinois. Oklahoma lies in the heart of the Bible Belt where Christianity, especially evangelical Christianity, is the norm. Religion in Oklahoma abounds in public life, and organized religion plays an open and important part in many people's normal routines.[9] The religious landscape in Chicago, however, appears quite different. While religion in the Windy City is still significant, the public presence of religion is muted in comparison to the fervor of religious expression found in Oklahoma. In other words, in one location people are likely to *feel* that being religious is normal (i.e., Oklahoma), and one where they are likely to *feel* that being strongly religious is unusual (i.e., Chicago).[10] These two contrasting settings thus provide a valuable opportunity to investigate the practical definitions of religion among both atheists and

[8] Of course, in reality no such clear-cut spectrum exists except in the minds of those who subscribe to it.
[9] This was especially noticeable to the atheists who had moved to Oklahoma from other, more secular, regions of the country.
[10] For example, my respondents in Oklahoma talked about how being Christian was assumed to be the default position of people they met, even in "secular" spaces like the workplace. In Chicago, however, my Christian respondents who worked in secular jobs assumed the opposite and could even list by name the small number of other Christians at their places of employment. An important caveat, however, is that the project focuses on whites; this situation may not be exactly the same for African Americans, Latinos, and other racial and ethnic groups.

evangelicals in environments of different ambient religion. Table 1.1 provides an overview of the research sites. Brief descriptions of the four sites follows.

Table 1.1. Field Site Summary

	Oklahoma	Chicago
Atheists	*Prairie Atheists*	*Chicago Atheist Groups*
Evangelicals	*Maple Street Baptist*	*Lake Church*

Prairie Atheists

Prairie Atheists is a loose organization that in 2016 had around 2,400 members and that usually holds between fifteen and twenty meetings each month in locations scattered throughout its metropolitan area.[11] The ages of group members range from college-age individuals to people in their sixties. Most are white, although there are also occasionally African Americans and Latinos in attendance as well. The group is approximately sixty percent male and forty percent female. Most people at meetings grew up in the region; despite this fact, liberal social and political views are the norm, as would be expected in an atheist organization (Smith 2013; Williamson and Yancey 2013). Members' employment status varies from individuals holding professional and managerial positions to students and those working in relatively menial entry-level jobs. While I did not conduct a full survey of every group member, it appears that the socioeconomic status of group participants, while likely still higher than national averages, varies

[11] During the period of primary fieldwork (2012–2014), the total membership on the website the group used to schedule in-person activities increased from around 800 to 1,800. Of these totals, between 200–600 were "active" at any one time, which means they had visited the group's membership page within the last thirty days. As of April 1, 2018, the membership was 2,757 total members and the 227 active members.

more than might be expected based on survey findings from other studies (cf. Williamson and Yancey 2013). The group includes a number of people working in blue collar careers and individuals without college degrees.[12]

Prairie Atheists does not own or rent building space, and meetings are usually held in local restaurants and other social venues such as bars, bowling alleys, etc. Meetings are organized via the group's website and publicized on a commercial website that aims to connect people having similar interests with one another. A large amount of group activity also takes place on a private internet page located on a social media website. In 2016, the private page had approximately 1,800 members, although membership lists, and even the existence of the page itself, are only available to invited participants. Most nonvirtual meetings are informal and are centered on their status as social events with the attendance at any particular event ranging from four to fifty people. There is no formal program at these social events; instead attendees mingle and chat about whatever they feel like regardless of whether or not it is related to atheism, religion, or the group as a whole. For example, there are several Prairie Atheists-associated standing lunch dates in different parts of the city where members meet during the week over their lunch breaks. Once a month there is a larger dinner event at a pizzeria, and the group also regularly fields a team at a local bar trivia night. Some events, however, are more formal. There

[12] I have several hypotheses why this is the case. I suspect that the variety in SES may be largely due to two factors: 1) Previous surveys of atheists may have overestimated the average SES of the atheist population (and other factors like age and prevalence of white males) due to a selection bias in the organizations chosen to generate survey samples; put simply, humanist and some primarily activist national atheist organizations that are easy to survey are not necessarily representative of the atheist population as a whole. 2) Atheist organizations in the Bible Belt likely draw a wider range of nonbelievers into an "active atheist" status than those in more secular settings because of the very public nature of religious culture in Bible Belt states. This is consistent with research suggesting that there are actually more atheist organizations in areas of the country with a high percentage of evangelicals (Garcia and Blankholm 2016).

are special outings to museums and lectures, which are sometimes held in conjunction with other nearby secular groups. There has even been a semi-regular monthly meeting on empowering atheists where eight to ten attendees visit the home of a member to discuss the challenges of being atheist in a religious society as well as to share their atheist "coming out" stories.

Chicago Atheist Groups

Unlike the large and well-organized atheist community in Oklahoma, the atheist groups in the Chicago region were much more fragmented during the period of this study. In all, I interacted with eight separate groups from a wide variety of secular perspectives. Most of these groups were more or less like the Prairie Atheists in terms of their general group activities and demographics, although all of the groups were much smaller and many had a more specific focus in addition to atheism, such as humanism or the skeptic movement.[13] Also, none of the groups had the kind of active online forum that Prairie Atheists used. Several groups' only activity consisted of periodic dinners together, which usually attracted around eight to fifteen people. With some exceptions, most of the groups only met once or twice a month at the most. One group did, however, meet every Sunday and resembled a traditional religious congregation in its program and form, except for the lack of traditional religious symbolism and the fact that most attendees were atheists. This humanist group was larger and older than the other primarily atheist organizations, both as an organization and in demographic terms. Generally, attendees at all events were somewhat older than in Oklahoma and many seemed more fervent in expressions of their atheism.

[13] As I am interested in how the categories like religion and atheism play out in everyday life, it becomes crucial to include humanist and skeptic organizations where most, if not all, members are atheist.

Evangelicals in Oklahoma and Chicago: Maple Street Baptist Church and Lake Church

Maple Street Baptist Church is a moderately large Southern Baptist congregation located in Oklahoma. Attendance at its weekly worship is around 1,200 individuals spread over two services. The church is somewhat unusual in its focus on various forms of outreach in the local community (Chaves 2003) but is otherwise fairly typical in comparison to other conservative Baptist churches in the area. For this project I focused on an adult Sunday school class aimed at couples in their thirties with children. The class was a useful setting to study practical definitions of religion since it was lay-person led and included a large amount of time spent socializing. The informal talk that occurred at these times was very useful in exploring practical definitions of religion. Most members of the class were white, although a small number of Hispanic and Asian Americans were represented as well. The economic status of class members varied widely: several were successful small business owners or management-level employees, while others worked in blue collar occupations.

Lake Church in Chicago is actually a series of interconnected congregations that meets in several locations, primarily on Chicago's North Side. Historically affiliated with a Baptist denomination, the church is now for all practical purposes non-denominational.[14] The population of worshipers at any particular location ranged from a few dozen to around 300 individuals. The central location is an old church building that the congregation owns; worship at other locations takes place in rented space such as auditoriums. Most attendees at Lake Church are relatively young whites in their twenties and thirties. The theological message and worship style of the

[14] In fact, many attendees seemed to be completely unaware that there was still a nominal affiliation with a Baptist denomination. One respondent, for example, expressed his preference for nondenominational churches and mentioned to me that he found the church through an internet search for nondenominational churches in Chicago.

church was very similar to that of Maple Street Church in Oklahoma.[15] For this project I concentrated on one of the many small groups that the church organizes.[16] The group met three to four times a month in a member's home. At any particular gathering there were around eight to twelve people. All were white and ages ranged from midtwenties to early forties. Activities at meetings of the small group were varied. Sometimes there was a seasonal theme, like carving pumpkins or decorating Christmas cookies. At other times members of the group just met and talked about issues related to their faith.

From an outside perspective, both congregations would fall under the general label "evangelical," although not everyone at these churches described themselves as such. Evangelical is, of course, an incredibly broad description that encompasses a wide variety of Christian beliefs and practices. There are also many different definitions within the scholarly community of exactly what it means to be evangelical (e.g., Balmer 1989; Bebbington 1989; Larsen 2007; Lindsay 2007). However, members of both of these congregations exhibit the classic indicators present in most all of these definitions, in particular, a focus on the Bible as supreme authority, some kind of personal conversion experience, an ongoing relationship with Christ, belief in salvation only through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, and an effort to convince others of their perspective. As described in detail in Chapter 2, many of the individuals at both of these congregations, however, chose to refer to themselves as "Christ-followers," instead of "evangelical," "Baptist," or sometimes even "Christian."

[15] I first learned of Lake Church from a member of the Maple Street Church who knew that I was going to be spending time in Chicago and suggested that I might like to attend.
[16] "Small groups" are small groups of Christians, usually from the same congregation, who meet together regularly at a member's home to support each other on their faith journeys.

How to study practical definitions?

Thoroughly studying practical definitions of religion presents a methodological challenge because it involves both understanding what people say about religion and how they enact religion in their daily lives. Influenced by work in cognitive science, anthropology, social psychology, as well as recent work in sociology, I took the somewhat unusual step of developing a mixed-method approach combining the traditional tools of participant observation and in-depth interviews with more formal field experiments. I did this because all of these disciplines either recognize, or are beginning to recognize, the general importance of cognitive context to people's actions and their own understandings of them. It became clear to me that such contextual effects have the potential to significantly influence what sociologists find in their studies, especially when studying complex and fuzzy categories like religion.

In sociology, the recent cognitive turn is well-documented (e.g., Cerulo 2010; D'Andrade 1995; DiMaggio 1997, 2002; Ignatow 2007; Lizardo and Strand 2010; Martin 2010a; Schwarz 1998; Vaisey 2009). Specifically, this body of work shows again and again that human cognition is affected by context; people literally think differently in different situations.[17] For example, the kind of cognition one uses when solving a complex math problem involving trains traveling at different speeds between two cities is different than the cognition used when choosing a donut at the coffee shop; one of these situations is cognitively difficult while the other is relatively easy.

[17] For example, much of our cognition is thought to be domain specific; we tend to use certain cognitive frameworks in particular situations. Domains are made up of groups of phenomena sharing properties (Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994). Similar to domains, schemas are the "organizing, conceptual structures in the mind that have developed from and are influenced by experience" (Narvaez and Bock 2002:298) and are a way that our minds organize information (Fiske and Linville 1980; Stillings et al. 1995). Schemas form clusters that are somewhat coherent, but only within specific domains (DiMaggio 1997, 2002; Hirschfeld and Gelman 1994).

When studying how people create, understand, use, and are affected by abstract categories, including the category of religion, the cognitive fact of these differences becomes significant. In the train example, we are likely drawing on a type of slow, deliberate cognition to work through a difficult problem, while when choosing a donut (most people) probably just pick what looks tasty without much further thought, drawing on a faster, more automatic cognitive process.[18] In a similar way, if you ask someone explicitly to define religion they are likely drawing heavily on this slower cognitive process, but in their daily life they just something and know whether or not it is religious without much conscious thought.

But does the fact that there are different types of cognition really matter for sociology? If our different cognitive styles always came to the same conclusions, their existence would be irrelevant for studying cultural categories. The accumulated evidence, however, suggests otherwise; we often think of the same thing differently in different cognitive contexts (e.g., Murphy 2004; Vaisey 2009). The effect of context is also not limited to just determining the degree to which we draw on our fast and slow cognitive processes, as in the examples above, but stretches even to how we understand natural categories more generally (see Murphy 2004). One obvious implication of this fact is that if context, broadly defined, influences how people think in specific situations, it can also influence the situations social scientists use to create data. In other words, data that is collected using one method, be it interviews, ethnography, or surveys, may only be telling us the part of the story based on the level of cognitive effort required by respondents in producing the data and the cognitive processes involved in that production.[19]

[18] This idea draws on the dual-process theory of cognition, which posits that humans have two different basic types of cognition (Chaiken 1980; Evans 2008; Sloman 1996; Smith and DeCoster 2000; Vaisey 2009). One is fast and not available to our conscious awareness while the other is slower and conscious.

[19] This argument is discussed in detail in Chapter 2.

Broadly speaking then, results gathered using any one way might not be directly relevant in other cognitive contexts or for other tasks. Describing an ideal donut in an interview and picking one out from the display case may not lead to the same donut chosen. Although a respondent *might* point to an identical donut in both the interview and the donut shop, this is an empirical question that needs to be answered with data instead of assumed *a priori*. In the same way, a respondent may implicitly offer a certain practical definition of religion during an interview yet act out a different version of their practical definition of religion in their daily life due to the variation between the cognitive contexts involved. Again, we do not know for certain that the practical definition will look different, but it remains an empirical question that calls for an answer.

However, it is vital to emphasize that the influence of cognitive context on behavior does not mean that the information that one learns through any one method, such as an interview, is wrong or flawed.[20] Quite the contrary; interviews, for example, tell us many things about the social world and are an invaluable tool for social scientists. If one were to misunderstand the cognitive science involved to mean that interviews should be abandoned in favor of surveys, then we would lose an irreplaceable means to access important discursive knowledge and also be worse off than we were when we started. The issue becomes problematic, however, when we assume that an interview, or any other method, necessarily tells us *everything* that there is to know. In any particular case, a certain method may very well tell us enough for our current object of inquiry; cognitive science, however, strongly suggests that there might be other perspectives that should also be taken into account. This applies just as much to any methods,

[20] There are other positions, however, which caution more strongly against the use of interview data. Martin (2010a:240) argues that, "if we want to learn about culture, the last thing we should do is to conduct in-depth interviews with a selection of informants, any more than we would expect to strike gold by asking them for whatever change is in their pockets." I hope this project's use of interview data convinces the reader otherwise.

such as field experiments, drawing explicitly on cognitive science as it does to the tried-and-true sociological tools such as the in-depth interview. The field experiments in this project, described below, are therefore not meant to replace or correct ethnography, in-depth interviews, or large-n surveys, but instead to supplement them with another perspective that cognitive science suggests may be useful to increase our understanding of the social world. In other words, I used a multi-method approach to studying practical definitions of religion in order to maximize the likelihood that we have learned everything we can about the practical definitions in the widest variety of possible social and cognitive contexts.

Three methods: Ethnography, in-depth interviews and field experiments

As described above, scholarship on categories and culture suggest that a multi-method approach is best suited to investigating questions of practical definitions. I therefore use three primary methods in this project: participant observation, in-depth interviews, and structured field experiments.

Participant observation offers the advantage of seeing *real-world behavior*. I participated in the activities of both atheist and religious groups. In the primary period of fieldwork, this included attending over 200 separate events at the four main field sites for over 400 hours of observation in the field conducted over approximately 24 months.[21] After the primary field period, I continued to regularly attend the events of the atheist and Christian target groups in Oklahoma in order to maintain contact with informants and directly compare my developing analysis to what I could observe in the field. These more relaxed observations informed my

[21] The primary period in which I conducted participant observation was from January 2012 through March 2014.

research but are not included in the hours and event totals. The traditional fieldnotes generated from the primary in-person observations were written after the events took place in order to avoid note taking in front of group members.[22] This was done to minimize overt reminders that a researcher was present.

During my ethnography I participated in the groups to the fullest extent possible. I ate lunch with atheists, prayed in small groups, marched in parades to raise awareness of atheism, and went door-to-door advertising a vacation bible school, among other activities. While doing all of this I concentrated my observations on informal situations, especially those where religion was mentioned both directly and indirectly. I was especially attentive to how groups and individuals talked about religion along with the explicit and implicit assumptions included in this discourse. Participant observation was used to document everyday behavior and as context for interpreting findings from in-depth interviews and field experiments. It also provided an opportunity to discover patterns and observe events that are only apparent and accessible after a prolonged period of interaction with a particular group, such as the use of religious humor in everyday conversation, which is the empirical focus of Chapter 3.

In addition to traditional in-person participant observation, I also wrote forty-eight online fieldnotes from the Prairie Atheists' private online forum. The online fieldnotes mirror traditional fieldnotes and include both summaries of discussions as well as some direct quotations. The main difference between the online and traditional fieldnotes is that the online notes are based on interactions taking place on the group's web forum instead of interactions

[22] The practice of writing fieldnotes from memory also likely affects what an ethnographer finds. People tend to remember the "gist" of things and not necessarily the specific details (Brainerd and Reyna 1993; Koriat, Goldsmith, and Pansky 2000). In other words, overall patterns are generally more likely to be recalled than particular episodes. In addition, memory also interacts with schemas (Alba and Hasher 1983; Koriat et al. 2000).

taking place in person. Because so many of the daily conversations in the group happen online, it became essential to include this additional setting in any analysis. Prairie Atheists is not, however, primarily an online community, and the bulk of data was gathered at in-person meetings.

The second method used was fifty-four in-depth interviews spread across the field sites.[23] Interviews were used to explore a wide range of cultural processes, especially those involving *discourses and emotion* (Pugh 2013).[24] The interviews covered personal religious histories, experiences with religion, and opinions and attitudes towards religion. The format and content of the interviews was based on preliminary findings from the initial ethnographic phase of the research. Interviews offered the opportunity to gather and record verbatim informants' detailed self-descriptions, allowing for a detailed analysis of specific speech patterns and genres (Bakhtin 1986). However, since in-depth interviews often require people to consciously reflect on current attitudes and past events, it also suggests that interview subjects are at times using cognitive processes that have more to do with explaining everyday actions rather than causing them (see Vaisey 2009), although it is difficult to distinguish that from within the interview context. Remember that this is not a limitation of interviews but rather a tool that should be used.

[23] In practice, participant observation and interviews are not entirely separable. An interview is also an ethnographic moment.

[24] Our own emotions, moods, and goals have been shown to affect cognition (MacCoun 1998; Showers and Cantor 1985). Symbols, schemas, and practices are often linked directly to emotional states. In addition, emotion likely affects our judgment by both serving as a source of information to make decisions and also by influencing what comes to our mind in the first place (Schwarz 1998). This is true even in the case of supposedly rational choices (Franks 2003), although there is evidence that emotion plays more of a role when situations become more personal (Greene et al. 2004). Emotions have also been shown to influence how others are viewed (Demoulin et al. 2004) and can be a key component of action (Izard 2009; Lerner and Tiedens 2006). This is especially true in emotions' influence on judgment and decision making. Such "hot cognition" is laden with emotions while "cold cognition" is unemotional and rational (Cerulo 2010; DiMaggio 2002).

Interviews therefore played a vital role in uncovering discursive strategies and justifications people offered for their opinions and behavior.[25]

Because it is difficult in practice to accurately identify cognitive processes using participant observation and interviews, I also employed more formal field experiments to fill in any gaps. By field experiments I am referring to specific activities that individuals were asked to perform outside of a laboratory setting and that are thought to provide insight into various cognitive processes. Primary field experiments included free lists, card sorts, timed Likert-style survey questions, rating scales, and vignettes (Bernard 2011; Borgatti and Halgin 2013; Brewer and Lui 1996; Coxon 1999; Maltseva and D'Andrade 2011; Swidler 2001; Vaisey 2009; Wallander 2009; Weller and Romney 1988; Willis 2005). Several of these tasks were combined into a single package that respondents completed on a tablet computer, while others were done separately in the field. The experiments as a whole were designed to vary by requiring different cognitive skills to complete. I settled on this strategy of using multiple complementary field methods not only to think about the category of religion, but also to explore culture more generally and to expand the tools we have to do such cultural research.

In total, four main field experiments were completed by respondents together as a single package. These tasks were designed based on a preliminary free listing exercise in addition to other data collected via ethnography and interviews. The first field experiment in the package

[25] As is well known, the way that questions are constructed, including their phrasing, delivery, and position within an interview or survey, can impact the answers received (Clark and Schober 1992; Payne 1951; Schuman 2008; Schuman and Presser 1981) and can even influence a subject's memory (Fisher and Geiselman 1992). Thus people may be nudged into remembering things differently depending on the methods used to get them to talk about those memories, again pointing to the importance of using multiple methods in the same project to engage different parts of cognition. During interviews, I attempted to avoid some of these problems by never asking directly about my primary research questions.

investigated areas of overlap between practical definitions of religion among atheists and evangelicals by having respondents rate the degree to which words from their combined free lists described the concepts of religion, atheism, spirituality, and Christianity. The second field experiment looked at how respondents imagined the field of religions by having them sort cards with the names of religions and religious denominations on them into piles that "go together." Respondents then again sorted the same cards they had just sorted, but this time into piles that reflect those religions' relationship to politics. The third exercise further explored the interplay between religion and politics by asking people to rate on a scale from one to nine whether certain public figures, for example the Dalai Lama or George W. Bush, were more political or religious. Lastly, the fourth experiment in the package asked people to respond to a series of vignettes designed to elicit their conceptions of the interplay between religion and politics, as well as further information about how they understood the category of religion itself. Besides the quantitative analysis performed on the data derived from these experiments, several of the experiments generated large amounts of qualitative data as well. This included not only the responses to the vignettes, but also respondents' verbal explanations of why they chose certain fixed-choice answers or why they completed the card sorts the way they did.

Chapter Outline

The remainder of this dissertation consists of three standalone articles that explore issues surrounding practical definitions of religion using the methods and data outlined above. These articles do not explicitly frame their arguments in terms of practical definitions of religion, yet each explores an aspect of the practical definitions of religion lived by the atheists and

evangelicals included in this project. Together, they illustrate the utility of closely examining fuzzy cultural categories, like religion, from the perspectives of the people whose lives we study. They also expand sociology's methodological toolkit for conducting these kinds of investigations.

Chapter 2, *Fast or Slow: Sociological Implications of Measuring Dual Process Cognition*, looks at how the concept of dual-process cognition has been used in sociology.[26] It suggests that measuring response latency in field experiments is a better way of incorporating the concept of dual-process cognition into sociological projects than simply relying on theoretical expectations to estimate when different modes of cognition might be used. Empirically, the chapter compares traits that atheists and evangelicals associated with religion, atheism, Christianity, and spirituality to better understand how different groups imagine these categories. Based on the results of this field experiment, it argues that while the evangelicals in the project expressed negative attitudes towards "religion" and positive attitudes towards "Christ-following," deep dispositions remained that encouraged them to still see religion as a positive entity. It further argues that the significance of dual-process theories to sociology is in untangling such complex webs of identity discourse by distinguishing between immediate responses primarily due to fast cognition, and those that are further mediated by slower, more deliberate cognition.

Chapter 3, *In the Eye of the Beholder: The Interplay of Religion and Politics in Creating the Field of Religion*, draws on the card-sorting field experiment to examine how people understood the shape of the field of religions, i.e., how various religions, religious denominations, and secular viewpoints are related to one another. It finds that the ways people

[26] This chapter was originally published in *Sociological Science* (Moore 2017a).

from the Oklahoma field sites in this project understood the field of religions changed based on the ingroup/outgroup status of the items they were categorizing and the items' perceived relationships to politics. When the card sorts were analyzed quantitatively, an interesting pattern emerged; when people categorized their own faith positions, they did so based on their understanding of the religious field, but when they categorized the faith positions of those who might be considered "adversaries" (atheists categorizing Christians and vice versa), they did so based on their understanding of the political field. Overall, the chapter suggests that people's conceptions of religion are deeply intertwined with their understandings of a religion's politics, as well as highly dependent on who they define as potential "allies" and "adversaries."

Chapter 4, *Sardonic Atheists and Silly Evangelicals: The Relationship between Self-Concept and Humor Style*, uses traditional ethnographic data to explain the different styles of humor used by atheists and evangelicals in my field sites.[27] It finds that aspects of self-concept that are central for a group's identity work, especially how the group imagines outsiders, open possibilities for certain types of humor while closing off others. Then micro-cultural processes, heavily dependent on the exact persons present in a given interaction, influence the humorous forms used. This process explains why minority groups—such as atheists in Oklahoma and evangelical Christians in Chicago—often make use of humor to generate solidarity in strikingly different ways, as well as why styles of humor vary, within limits, within these groups. Atheists understood themselves to be intelligent, moral and liberated—in sharp contrast to religious people who from their perspective exhibited the opposite qualities—and this helped foster outwardly directed humor where religion was often the target. Evangelicals in Chicago, however, saw themselves as broken sinners who recognized the truth of God's kingdom. Non-believers

[27] This chapter was originally published in *Qualitative Sociology* (Moore 2017b).

were not seen to be objects of ridicule, but of pity. This encouraged humor in this evangelical setting to be directed inward and have a relatively mild tone. Thus, the chapter shows how the interplay between practical definitions of one's own religious perspective as well as those of significant outgroups can affect the minutia of daily interaction more generally, in this case through the kinds of humor used. Following this chapter, there is a short conclusion that ties together the overall themes of the dissertation and discusses directions for future scholarship.

CHAPTER 2. FAST OR SLOW: SOCIOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MEASURING DUAL-PROCESS COGNITION

The concepts of fast and slow cognition have recently received increasing attention within the sociology of culture.[1] Several scholars have used dual-process frameworks to back their empirical and theoretical claims (Cerulo 2010; Escher 2013; Lizardo, McVeigh, and Mustillo 2016; Martin and Desmond 2010; Miles 2015; Srivastava and Banaji 2011; Vaidyanathan, Hill, and Smith 2011), while others have called the sociological significance of dual-process theories of cognition into question, critiquing their practical application to empirical cases (Berezin 2014; Jerolmack and Khan 2014; Pugh 2013; Wuthnow 2011). One major limitation in this debate, however, is that sociologists making use of dual-process theories in their work often fail to provide empirical evidence from their own data specifically confirming their dual-process claims. Instead, scholars usually rely on theoretical assumptions from psychology, both to infer the existence of different processing modes and to offer guidance as to what type of cognitive processing takes place when. While such borrowing of concepts removed from direct data is an important first step in cross-disciplinary work, it eventually becomes necessary to verify their veracity in sociological settings using sociological data. Doing so is also necessary as the sociological concept of culture moves further away from viewing culture as a static whole located outside of people's minds and more towards the idea that culture is a complex combination of intertwined mental acts and processes (Martin 2010b).

In this article, I provide such evidence for dual-process cognition using measures of response latency in formal data collected in conjunction with an ethnographic study of atheists

[1] This chapter appears with the permission of the copyright holder and was originally published as: Moore, Rick. 2017. "Fast or Slow: Sociological Implications of Measuring Dual-Process Cognition." *Sociological Science* 4:196–223.

and evangelicals in the Bible Belt. Recording the amount of time it takes someone to respond on a task is a proven method social psychologists employ to measure differences between fast and slow cognition but one that has seldom made its way into sociological research. Such measures move sociology towards treating the influence of the dual processes in various domains as an empirical question and away from considering their impact to be an analytical assumption (Lizardo et al. 2016).

Theoretically, I build upon recent work in sociology exploring the relationship between our dual cognitive processes (Hoffmann 2014; Ignatow 2014; Leschziner and Green 2013; Miles 2015; Vaisey 2009; Vila-Henninger 2015). Sometimes a person may rely primarily on their faster cognition, while other times they may use a combination of fast and slow cognition. Examining these differences potentially offers insight into how subjects express the self, especially in regards to fluid and situated identities. Identities are complex, multifaceted concepts developed over the life course, which often blend core identities learned early with other identities acquired later in life (Brekhus 2015; Cerulo 1997; Howard 2000); not all identities expressed may be done so with the same strength and/or emerge in all of the same settings. Distinguishing between immediate responses primarily due to fast cognitive processes, and those that are further mediated by slower, more deliberate cognition, thus offers a tool to help untangle the complex web of discourses people use to express their sense of self.

For example, the evangelical Christians in this study—many of whom refer to themselves as "Christ-followers"—distinguished in interviews and observational data between "Christianity," which they considered good, and "religion," which was considered a negative, man-made construct. Timed response data from a survey-like task showed, as expected, that these Christians were quicker to associate positive terms with Christianity and slower to

associate negative terms with it, reflecting their deeply ingrained fast cognition that Christianity is a positive entity. However, the same evangelical respondents were also quicker to associate positive over negative terms with "religion," despite this reaction being at odds with their verbal distancing of religion from the true Christian faith. This suggests that despite expressing a self-concept that rejects religion, deep dispositions remain that generally associate religion as being a positive, not a negative, entity for these Christians, at least in some circumstances.

Theoretical Background

Dual-process theories of cognition, while prominent in psychology since the 1980s (see Evans 2008 for a review), have only relatively recently been adopted explicitly within sociology (DiMaggio 1997, 2002). Most sociological dual-process theories draw directly on cognitive science and social psychology to argue that the dual-process aspect of human cognition is critical to understanding the role of culture in motivating action (e.g., Cerulo 2010; Knorr-Cetina 2014; Martin 2010b; Vaisey 2009). If the dual-process theory of cognition is true in the way that these studies claim, it has major ramifications for research methodologies and for understanding how culture works more generally. In particular, a consensus has emerged among several sociologists that our fast cognition is a crucial aspect of our moral decision-making process (Hoffmann 2014; Martin 2010b; Vaisey 2009; Vaisey and Lizardo 2010).

To briefly review, the most basic version of dual-process theory, as the name implies, asserts that humans have two different types of cognition.[2] One is fast and not available to our conscious awareness, while the other is slower and conscious. The fast process allows us to make immediate snap judgments without much cognitive effort based on pattern recognition and

[2] See Lizardo et al. (2016) for a broad review of several dual-process theories from cognitive and social psychology that are especially relevant for the sociological study of culture.

experience. The slower process allows for the careful consideration of problems, is often discursive in practice, and is at times associated with reasoning and/or justifications after the fact. Different scholars name these fast/slow processes differently: for example, heuristic/systematic (Chaiken 1980), associative/rule-based (Sloman 1996; Smith and DeCoster 2000), System 1/System 2 (Evans 2008), or practical/discursive (Vaisey 2009), just to name a few. While there are many nuanced and important differences between the various conceptions of dual-process theory that are beyond the scope of this article—including whether the processes operate sequentially or in parallel to one another (Evans and Stanovich 2013)—the basic idea of the dual processes themselves has become an accepted standard within cognitive and social psychology and is supported by many empirical studies (see Chaiken and Trope 1999; Evans 2008; Fazio and Olson 2003; Smith and DeCoster 2000; Stanovich 2011). It is worth noting that while these dual-process theories stemming directly from cognitive science are new to sociology, implicit sociological dual-process theories, from the work of scholars such as Giddens (1984), Bourdieu (1990) and Dewey (1930), have been influential in our discipline for some time (for partial reviews, see: Vaisey 2009 and Vila-Henninger 2015).

Sociologists drawing on the psychological concepts of fast and slow cognitive processes frequently describe them using the terms “practical” and “discursive,” respectively. Following the nomenclature used by Evans (2008) in his review of the dual-process literature within psychology, I use the more common, cross-disciplinary terms System 1 to refer to our fast cognitive processing, and System 2 to refer to our slower processing. As alternatives to System 1 and System 2 processing, I also simply refer to fast and slow processing, or cognition, as well, as those are the most commonly accepted features distinguishing the two cognitive modes.

The Relationship between Fast and Slow Processing

There are several different theories as to the relationship between System 1 and System 2 processing. One position makes a strong argument that our System 1 processing drives most of our daily decision making and virtually all of our decision making regarding questions of morality (Haidt 2001, 2006; Vaisey 2009). Our System 2 processing, in this model, is primarily concerned with developing justifications after the fact for decisions that System 1 processing has already made. This interpretation of the relationship between fast and slow cognition has enormous implications. If most of our decision making stems from unconscious System 1 cognition, then it follows that if we want to understand social interaction, we must find a way to access people's System 1 processing. Simply asking people to explain why they did something, as happens during an in-depth interview, would usually be inadequate under this theory, as an open-ended question would encourage a person to deliberate and thus use slower System 2 processing.[3]

In some of its sociological formulations, this interpretation of dual-process theory appears to imply that in many situations, decisions are made primarily using *either* System 1 *or* System 2 processing and that researchers must simply recognize what kinds of actions (or types of questions) are associated with each system (c.f. Brekhus 2015; Leschziner and Green 2013). For example, Vaisey (2009) argues that "interview methods engage with [System 2] consciousness *alone*" and then goes on to assert that fixed response questions, in contrast, mainly involve System 1 processing by their very nature (1687–1689; emphasis mine).[4] Others have also written

[3] See Haidt (2001) for possible exceptions under this model that may cause decision making to be made using System 2 processing.

[4] That Vaisey (2009) makes this point is significant; the article has become one of the most well-known sociological pieces addressing dual-process cognition and is thus uniquely poised to shape other sociologists' understanding of dual-process theory (Lizardo, McVeigh, and Mustillo

about the dual processes in a similar fashion, suggesting that certain settings are inherently positioned to activate System 1 processing, such as surveys (Bonikowski 2016; Ignatow 2014; Opfer, Pedder, and Lavicza 2011) and visual (Friedman 2016), while in-depth interviews likely only access System 2 processing. These examples point to a trend among some sociologists to talk about the dual processes in a way that, at least on the surface, implies that the processes have clear domains that can be easily mapped on to existing sociological methods. I will refer to this combination of theorizing that System 1 takes precedence in nearly all decision making and effectively positing that only one system at a time determines an outcome (i.e., that System 2 processing determines in-depth interview answers, while System 1 processing determines survey responses) as the "either/or" model.[5]

The either/or model and its implications for interview data has engendered significant critique, even by supporters of a cognitive sociology more generally (Leschziner and Green 2013; McDonnell 2014; Mische 2014; Shepherd 2011; Vaisey 2014; Vila-Henninger 2015). Several sociologists have consistently argued for the value of supposed System 2 settings, such as in-depth interviews, to provide access to motivational issues (Edgell 2012; McDonnell 2014; Mische 2014; Pugh 2013). Vaisey also later moved towards this camp, writing in a response to Pugh (2013) that the relationship between the processing systems is likely more complex than he originally presented (Vaisey 2014).

2016; Pugh 2013). One measure of its reach is that it has already been cited over 200 times by entries in ProQuest's Sociological Abstract database.

[5] There is a possibility that this does not reflect a model per se but rather a discourse that, for rhetorical purposes, oversimplifies some important points of dual-process theories originating in psychology. Others have, however, noted that the theory as expressed by this discourse has an either/or character to it (Leschziner and Green 2013).

Many cognitive and social psychologists, meanwhile, have long argued that both cognitive modes operate simultaneously and that one cannot easily distinguish their individual domains (Chaiken 1980; Sloman 1996; Smith and DeCoster 2000; Uleman, Saribay, and Gonzalez 2008). Still, others suggest a "default interventionist" approach, in which System 1 makes an initial decision that can then overridden by System 2 (Evans and Stanovich 2013). Vila-Henninger (2015) summarizes a large body of scholarship from cognitive neuroscience supporting a default interventionist interpretation (e.g., Greene 2007; Moll et al. 2005; Paxton, Ungar, and Greene 2012; Squire 2004). Taken together, these works provide ample evidence that System 2 cognition can, in fact, drive everyday decision making. Vila-Henninger (2015) makes this case persuasively, suggesting that sometimes we let System 1 keep control and sometimes we use System 2 to override or respond to what System 1 comes up with, especially in difficult situations, such as when breaking social norms. In these more comprehensive views based on the broader consensus within cognitive science, there are still two distinct processing systems, but they operate together much more closely than several existing sociological explanations have implied.

This relationship between processing systems has implications for how we are to make sense of the ways people express the self. People perform various identities and roles, which often have a deeply moral character, at different times and in diverse settings (Brekhus 2015; Cerulo 1997; Howard 2000). Some of these expressions of self are performed automatically, while others take various amounts of deliberate work to achieve (Danna Lynch 2009). This suggests that some identity expressions likely draw on System 1 processing and are deeply ingrained into our habitus, while others require additional System 2 processing to enact. It appears unlikely that System 1 processing alone drives most decisions regarding the presentation

of situated moral identities. Examining the differences in processing modes—and when each occurs—has the potential to help untangle complex, and often seemingly contradictory, identity performances in everyday life by shedding light on the concrete situations that encourage the use of System 1 and System 2 processing.

How to Measure Fast and Slow Cognition

How do we recognize the results of System 1 and System 2 cognition in sociological research? If we agree that the dual processes matter for sociology, then accurate indicators of their influence are critical. The position that fixed response survey questions potentially offer insight into System 1 processing, while in-depth interviews usually do not, does have its merits. The basic idea is that most of what we do in daily life is more like picking someone out of a lineup (i.e., System 1, intuitive) than describing that person to a sketch artist (i.e., System 2, calculated) (Vaisey 2009, 2014). Upon further thought, however, relying on broad question type alone may not always work because the type of processing someone uses can have less to do with how a question is asked than what a person is asked about. For example, when people are asked about a topic that is of little importance to them, they are more likely to primarily employ their System 1 processing (Chaiken 1980; Smith and DeCoster 2000). Priming effects can also encourage people to rely on an initial decision made by System 1 processing (Bargh 1999), as can having expertise in a topic (Evans 2008; Reyna 2004). Explicit instructions to use reasoning abilities, meanwhile, can encourage the use of System 2 processing (Evans and Stanovich 2013). Importantly, it seems that difficult judgments, such as moral judgments that go against a social norm, require System 2 processing to override an initial System 1 response (Vila-Henninger 2015). In summary, the literature suggests that some kinds of judgments tend to be “easier” and

thus more likely to draw heavily on System 1 processing without being supervened by System 2 processing, regardless of the question format. Other judgments are more "difficult" and require additional thought using System 2 processing after any initial System 1 processing, again independent of the format of the question that was asked.

All of this calls into question the strategy of simply relying on survey questions to measure fast cognition. In the end, we do not have any way of knowing whether or not the person who answered a standard survey question did so quickly and intuitively or carefully considered each possible response.[6] This means that survey questions are not necessarily evidence for fast processing even if there are legitimate reasons to believe that fast processing might be more likely in a closed survey question than in an open-ended interview. There are, however, existing methodologies from the psychological sciences that can help us deal with this problem.

One of the most accepted properties in practically all dual-process theories is that one process is *fast* and the other process is comparatively *slow*. In psychology, this feature is taken advantage of by timing how long it takes someone to complete a given task, such as answering a question. Quicker response times are generally interpreted as a sign of System 1 processing making the decision with little or no input from System 2, while slower response times are interpreted as some combination of System 1 and System 2 being involved in the decision-making process (Logan 1988; Martin and Desmond 2010). This pattern is expected under both the parallel processing and dual interventionist models. Thus, one solution to begin untangling

[6] It is possible to design specialized survey questions that use variations in cognitive load to separate decisions made between System 1 and System 2 processing (Lizardo et al. 2016; Miles 2015). Standard survey instruments, however, cannot do this.

the combination of cognitive processes someone might be using is to measure the amount of time it takes the person to complete a specially designed task.

Using response latencies to measure System 1 and System 2 processing also allows one to examine how different scenarios might influence cognitive processing. If a series of questions are virtually identical except for the target they are measuring (as in a series of Likert scales), then comparing response times across questions should provide useful information on when people use different combinations of processing. Theoretically, easier questions that align with a respondent's knowledge and worldview would likely be more reliant on System 1 processing without significant intervention by System 2 processing, while more difficult questions that either go beyond respondents' knowledge or challenge their worldview would likely draw on both System 1 and System 2 processing. Response latency therefore offers a proxy providing insight into which situations tend to encourage people to use various combinations of System 1 and System 2 processing. This solution has the potential to help untangle talk expressing complex identities by distinguishing which aspects are activated through mainly System 1 processing—indicating their deeper incorporation into the habitus—and seeing what aspects require additional System 2 processing, suggesting that more conscious thought is required.

Overview of Research

In order to demonstrate empirical evidence for this version of dual-processing theory, I draw on a unique data set measuring the degree to which people associate a list of concepts with religion, atheism, spirituality, and Christianity. The data set was collected as part of a larger, primarily ethnographic project investigating the construction of religion as a social category. This larger project was based on over two years of fieldwork at four different research sites: an

atheist organization in Oklahoma, an evangelical church in Oklahoma, a set of atheist organizations in the Chicago metropolitan area, and an evangelical church in Chicago.[7] At all four field sites participant observation and in-depth interviews were used. At the two field sites in Oklahoma, however, these traditional methods were also supplemented with a series of field experiments, one of which was designed to measure the use of fast and slow cognition. Following Coxon and Jones (1978), these experiments produced a rich data set drawn from a small sample of the target population, prioritizing the depth of the data over sample size. The series of experiments was completed by respondents from the ethnographic fieldsites during a special structured field experiment interview.

Field Experiment: Rating Applicability of Words to Targets

Ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews in the project suggested that there were unexpected points of agreement between atheists and evangelicals on some of the traits associated with "religion." Some evangelicals differentiated Christianity from religion and used "religion" as a pejorative term, even echoing critiques more usually expressed by atheists (e.g., that religion is man-made or that religion is primarily about rules). This finding raised questions about the shape of potential overlaps between the atheists' and evangelicals' conceptions of religion, as well as their conceptions of related categories like Christianity, spirituality, and atheism. A field experiment was therefore designed to explore common features that atheists and evangelicals associated with "religion," "atheism," "spirituality," and "Christianity." During the

[7] In this article, "evangelical" denotes theologically conservative Christians who focus on the Bible as supreme authority, actively pursue an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ, believe in salvation only through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, make an effort to convince others of their perspective, and often have had some kind of personal conversion experience (see Balmer 1989; Bebbington 1989; Larsen 2007; Lindsay 2007).

task, both atheists and evangelicals were asked to rate the degree to which a series of 39 words described these four target concepts. In addition to the rating, the amount of time it took respondents to select an answer on each pairing between a word and a target was also measured.

Sample Populations

The field experiments were conducted with the members of an atheist organization and an evangelical church in the same metropolitan area of Oklahoma. The atheist organization is loosely organized, with approximately 2,400 members, although only a small percentage of those attended in-person meetings during the period of fieldwork. Meetings occurred up to fifteen times per month and were mostly social occasions in which small groups of atheists met for informal events such as lunch or a bar trivia night. Most attendees were white, although there were occasionally African Americans and Hispanics in attendance as well. The group was approximately 60 percent male and spanned a wide range of ages, from young people in their late teens and early twenties to retired individuals in their sixties and seventies.

The church studied in the project was a white evangelical congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention. Weekly attendance at worship services averaged around 1,200 individuals during the study period. Fieldwork at the church was conducted primarily with the members of an adult Sunday school that met before worship on Sundays. This class was mainly composed of married couples in their thirties or forties and served as a de facto evangelical small group for many of its members.[8] Attendance at the class was usually around fifteen people any given Sunday, although the total number of people affiliated with the class was much higher.

[8] An evangelical "small group" is group of people who meet regularly to help each other along their faith journeys.

Some participants in the field experiments were also recruited from a similar Sunday school class that split off to focus on married couples in their twenties. There were no substantive differences in the results reported between how members of the two classes completed the field experiments.

Methods

The list of words for respondents to rate was created from an initial free listing exercise completed by members of each field site. Respondents were asked to list as many items as they could that met the listing criteria (Bernard 2011; Borgatti and Halgin 2013; Coxon 1999; Weller and Romney 1988). In other words, instead of assuming that a domain (e.g., religion) has certain characteristics, a free list is one way to explore emic conceptions of the domain in question by simply asking people familiar with it to list examples or characteristics of it. In this case, respondents were asked to list as many words as they could that described "religion." The same question was then repeated for "atheism," "spirituality" and "Christianity."[9] As participant observation and in-depth interviews in the project had indicated that some of the evangelicals did not consider Christianity to be a "religion" (c.f. Smith 1998), both "religion" and "Christianity" were included as targets in the free list.

Data collection for the free lists was handled differently for the atheists and evangelicals because of the different structures of their respective organizations. Because the atheist organization studied in Oklahoma has an active private web forum, an online version of the free listing task was created. After securing permission from the group's leadership, an announcement was placed in the forum asking for anonymous participation. In addition to the

[9] The exact wording of the questions were "What words best describe *x*? Please list as many as you can," in which *x* was the term of interest for the particular question (religion, atheism, spirituality, or Christianity).

online announcement, twenty-four individuals who were well known to the author from fieldwork were sent direct invitations asking them to participate. The survey remained online for one week in May of 2014. This method generated eighty-four eligible responses. The evangelical church, however, did not have a comparable web forum, so collecting data in a similar fashion was not possible. Instead, a paper version of the same survey was distributed during one session of the adult Sunday school that was the key site in the ethnographic phase of the project. Later, a link was distributed via email by the class's leader to an online version for those who might not have been in class that particular day. The combination of these methods generated twenty-eight evangelical responses, the large majority of which were collected via the paper in-class survey.

The "clean" versions of the combined free list results (i.e., lists in which synonyms were combined) became the basis for the list of words in the word rating exercise.[10] The list of words that respondents rated was created by taking the top five words in the free list from each of eight categories: atheists' and evangelicals' descriptors of religion, atheism, spirituality, and Christianity. If there was a tie for the fifth word in a category, all words that appeared with that same frequency were included. If a word was repeated in more than one category (i.e., used by both atheists and evangelicals to describe targets or used by one group to describe multiple targets), it was only included once in the list of words created for the rating exercise. The procedure resulted in a single list of thirty-nine words that was then rated by both groups. This meant that atheists rated not only words suggested by fellow atheists but also words that were originally suggested by evangelicals. Evangelicals, likewise, rated words that were proposed by

[10] For example, in the raw atheist combined free list for words describing "religion," eighteen people listed "control," eight listed "controlling," another eight wrote "manipulative," one listed "crowd control," and one person wrote "power over others." As all of these descriptors appear to be describing a single concept, all of the words were recoded as "control" for purposes of analysis. The complete record of this recoding is available from the author upon request.

atheists as well as evangelicals. Table 2.1 shows the words that were chosen through this method for the rating exercise.[11]

Table 2.1. Free list words used in timed rating exercise

Ambiguous	Empty	Holy Spirit	New Age
Antiquated	Faith/Belief	Hypocrisy	Organized
Brainwashing	Fear	Inner	Prayer
Christ followers	False	Intolerant	Practice
Christian	Freedom	Jesus/Christ	Rules
Church	Forgiveness	Knowledge	Science
Close to God	God	Lies	Silly
Control	Godless	Lost	Skeptical
Disbelief	Heart	Love	Works
Emotion	Higher Power	Money	

After the words to be rated were compiled, the actual word rating survey instrument was created in Qualtrics and designed to be completed by respondents in person on a tablet computer. Beyond a short introductory section with instructions and practice questions, the survey consisted of four sets of closed questions: one set each on religion, atheism, spirituality, and Christianity. In each set, respondents were asked to what extent each of the thirty-nine words described the target concept of that section. The exact wording was: "To what extent does the following word describe '*x*,' " in which *x* was the term of interest for the particular question (religion, atheism, spirituality, or Christianity). The words to be rated were displayed one at a time, with only one word rated on a given page. Within each section (e.g., "religion"), the thirty-

[11] The only exception to this procedure was "emotion," which replaced the free list word "woo." Pretesting the word rating exercise revealed that many respondents were confused by "woo," which is used in some atheist and skeptic communities to refer to pseudoscientific explanations. As there is often an emotional component to "woo," "emotion" was used as a substitute.

nine words were presented in a random order to each respondent. The section order, however, was fixed with religion first, followed by atheism, spirituality, and finally Christianity. Christianity was presented last to give the evangelical respondents the chance to rate the degree to which words applied to religion before knowing there was to be a later section specifically for Christianity. Participants choose their ratings for words from five categories, arranged horizontally on the tablet screen, that were similar to those used in Likert scales: (1) not at all, (2) a little, (3) moderately, (4) quite a bit, and (5) extremely.[12] After respondents selected their choice by touching the screen with their finger or a stylus, the screen automatically advanced to the next page and displayed a new question. Importantly for the argument here, in addition to recording respondents' rating of how much the word described the target, the survey recorded in milliseconds how long it took for the respondent to select a choice after a word pair was displayed on the screen.

Following the initial set of instructions at the start of the exercise, respondents completed a set of three practice questions to familiarize themselves with the question format and with answering using the tablet computer. After completing the practice section, participants were given an opportunity to ask the interviewer questions before starting the actual exercise. Between the sections of the survey, a page without questions appeared on the screen to alert respondents that a new section was about to begin and that the target word was about to change (e.g., atheism, instead of religion). A progress bar at the top of the screen gave participants an idea of how many questions were left in this particular field experiment.

In total, excluding the practice section, this procedure resulted in 156 separate ratings for each respondent to make (39 words × 4 targets). Even with this relatively large number of

[12] A screenshot of the interface can be found in Appendix A, Figure A.1.

ratings, the mean amount of time required to finish the exercise, including reading instructions and completing practice questions, was 15.6 minutes (SD = 5.9). The exact instructions given and an example of the survey interface can be found in Appendix A.

After a pretesting phase, which resulted in only minor modifications in the interface and protocol, a combination of convenience and snowball samples of respondents for the experiment was recruited from the atheist and evangelical field sites where I had earlier conducted participant observation and in-depth interviews. As much as possible, I attempted to recruit people who had already completed an in-depth interview, although the final sample did not match the earlier interview phase exactly. The structured field experiment interviews, which included the rating exercise, took place between September 2015 and June 2016. The sessions were usually conducted in public spaces such as coffee shops, although some were completed in respondents' homes or offices. All field experiment interviews were administered by the author. The final sample size for the word rating experiment was N = 40, evenly split between atheists and evangelicals (atheists: N = 20; evangelicals: N = 20).

Results: Ratings of Word Applicability to Targets

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the exercise provided evidence that atheists and evangelicals view their respective ingroup and outgroups very differently from one another and differ on the traits associated with four target categories in the exercise. Figure 2.1 shows the words that each group, on average, rated as describing Christianity or atheism at least "moderately."[13] The white areas in Figure 2.1 indicate words that each group alone applied to the respective target. For example, evangelicals, on average, rated "freedom" as applying at least moderately to

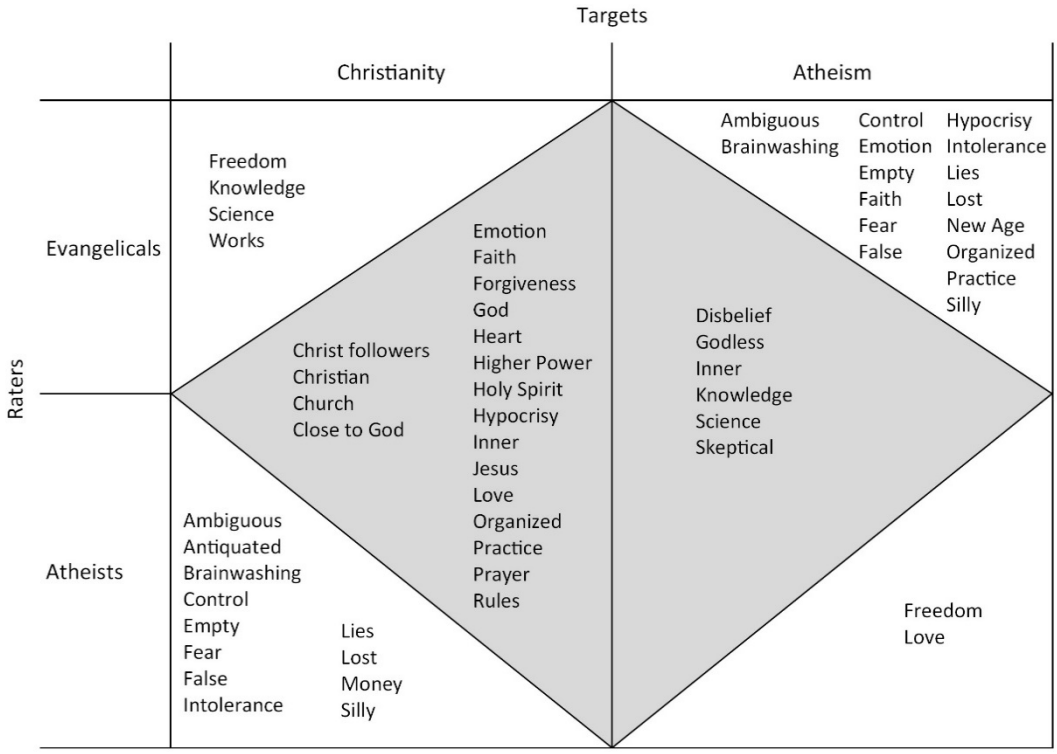
[13] This translates to a rating of ≥3 when mean scores are rounded to the nearest whole number.

Christianity, while the atheists did not. The area shaded gray in the center of the figure indicates words that both groups rated as applying to either Christianity or atheism, depending on which side of the center line they are listed. For example, both groups, on average, rated "God" as applying at least moderately to Christianity. Notice that each group tended to attribute negative words to their outgroup but not to themselves. Negative words fitting this pattern included: "ambiguous," "brainwashing," "control," "empty," "fear," "false," "intolerance," "lies," "lost," and "silly." In other words, each group appeared to think that the other group in the exercise had more to do with these negative words than they did themselves.

In addition to this pattern of attributing negative words more towards outgroups than themselves, there were two positive words for which the opposite pattern held. Atheists and evangelicals, on average, rated "freedom" and "knowledge" as applying more to their own group than to their religious opposite.[14] Freedom, in particular, had a large difference between ingroup and outgroup ratings for atheists. The mean rating by atheists for freedom describing atheism was 4.05, but only 1.40 when describing religion and 1.05 when describing Christianity. The idea that many atheists feel freed by their nonbelief has been reported in other studies (Baker and Smith 2015; Zuckerman 2012) and was a theme that surfaced during participant observation and in-depth interviews with this particular atheist group.

[14] As seen in Figure 2.1, both groups agreed that "knowledge" applied to atheism. Evangelicals, however, rated "knowledge" as applying more to Christianity (mean = 4.1) than to atheism (mean = 3.2). This difference is statistically significant at $p<0.001$ (t-tests, two-tailed).

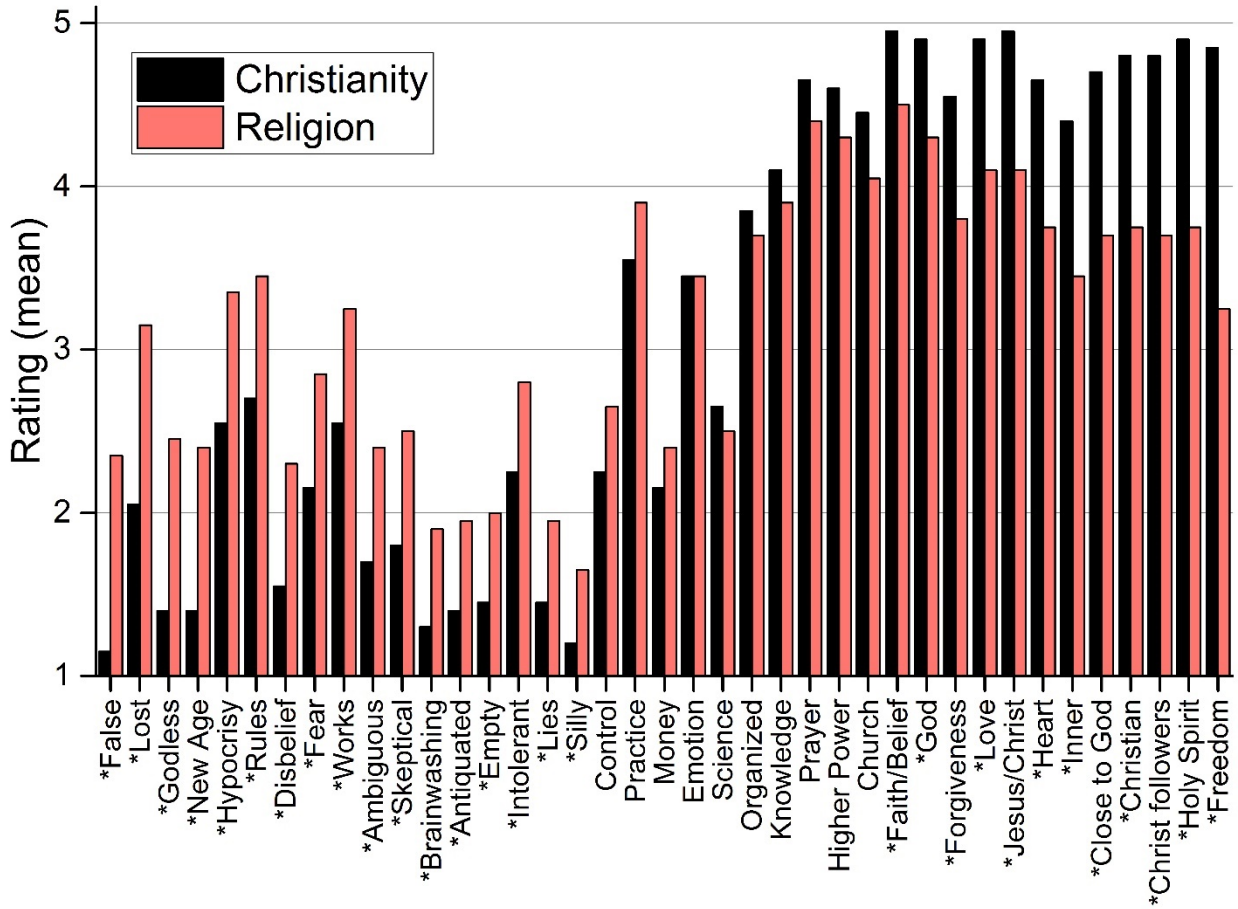
Figure 2.1. Words evangelicals and atheists rated as at least "Moderately" applying to Christianity or atheism (rating ≥ 3, rounded)
Areas shaded gray signify words both groups indicated applied at least "Moderately" to Christianity or atheism.



Beyond the differences between how atheists and evangelicals rated categories corresponding to their own belief orientation, evangelicals, on average, also tended to distinguish between Christianity and religion more generally. The idea that religion is different from Christianity is common in many evangelical communities (cf. Smith 1998; Smith and Denton 2005) and was a theme that arose frequently in ethnographic fieldwork and in-depth interviews with members of the church community studied in this research. Figure 2.2 shows the mean ratings on all thirty-nine words rated by the evangelicals when applied to religion and Christianity, sorted by their difference. Words for which the difference between religion and Christianity was statistically significant using t-tests at $p<0.05$ are marked with an asterisk. Words towards the left side of the graph are those that were rated, on average, as describing

religion more than describing Christianity, while words towards the right side of the graph were rated, on average, as describing Christianity more than religion. Those in roughly the middle portion of the graph were applied roughly equally to both Christianity and religion. As can be seen in the figure, the evangelicals rated most positive words as applying less to religion than Christianity (right side of the graph). Conversely, they rated many potentially negative words as applying more to religion than Christianity (left side of the graph).

Figure 2.2. Evangelicals' mean ratings of words describing "Christianity" and "religion." * $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed), from t-test on difference between "Christianity" and "religion."



This trend resulted in several interesting points of agreement between the atheists and evangelicals: both groups tended to agree that a number of potentially negative words were related to religion either "moderately" (3) or "quite a bit" (4).[15] These words included "control," "fear," "hypocrisy," "intolerant," "lost," and "rules." Evangelicals also associated religion at the "quite a bit" level with "works." Works in the evangelical community is a pejorative term referring to the (for evangelicals) theologically deviant practice of believing salvation can be earned through one's actions instead of it being an undeserved gift from Jesus Christ (Long 2007). With the exception of "control," all of these potentially negative words were rated by the evangelical respondents as applying more to religion than to Christianity.[16] This means that although the evangelicals saw their primary outgroup of atheists as generally more negative than themselves, they also applied some of these same negative terms to what appears to be a secondary outgroup, namely religion itself.

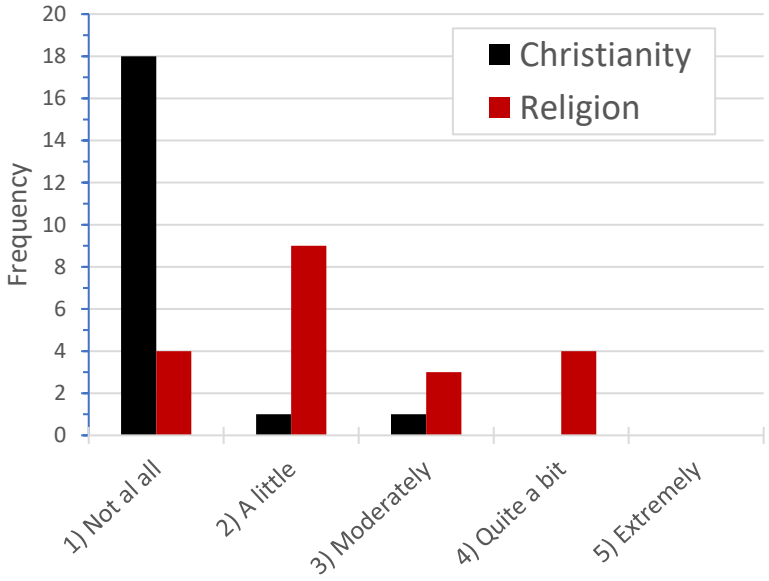
This separation of Christianity from religion can also be seen in the difference between the two ratings evangelicals applied to "false" (located on the far left of Figure 2.2), which received the lowest rating of any word when applied to Christianity. While virtually no evangelicals rated false as applying to Christianity to any degree, the mean of false applied to religion suggests that some respondents believed that false applied, at least somewhat, to religion. Examining this difference more closely, the idea of religion being to some extent false is spread out over a large portion, although not all, of evangelical respondents. Figure 2.3 shows the distribution of the number of evangelical respondents rating false as applying to Christianity and religion at each of the five response levels. The black bar corresponds to Christianity while

[15] This applies when mean scores are rounded to the nearest whole number.
[16] Significance tested using t-tests. $p<0.05$ (two-tailed).

the red bar represents religion. While by far the majority of respondents (18/20) said that false applies to Christianity "not at all," only 4/20 said the same thing when false was applied to religion. Although no evangelical respondents agreed that religion was "extremely" false, four did report that it was "quite a bit" false and another three called it "moderately" false.

One possible explanation for this difference is that the term religion in this exercise may have been understood to be more general than Christianity in that it also includes "false," non-Christian belief systems as well (e.g., Islam). While this may contribute to the differences seen in ratings, ethnographic fieldwork and interviews suggest that something more is at work. "Religion" at this church was frequently associated with Christianity but usually in a very negative way. It was common for people to critique as "religious" Christian practices that were deemed incorrect. Calling something religious meant that it was considered to be closer to simple rule following, i.e., works, than to building a proper relationship with Jesus Christ. As one woman explained in an in-depth interview conducted several months before these field experiments, "*I almost hate the word religion. I love the word relationship, because to me, that relationship is with God. I just hate the organized structured aspect that goes along with so many things that fall under that word 'religion' in general*." Several people even went so far as to say that *Christianity is not a religion*. As one participant in the field experiments phrased it before equating religion with "works," "*there's definitely a distinction between practicing religion and our beliefs in Christianity*."

Figure 2.3. Evangelical distribution of “false” applied to Christianity and religion. N = 20



Often, these same individuals critical of “religion” would refer to themselves as “Christ-followers.” This term was used by some in addition to more common labels such as “Christian,” “Baptist,” or “evangelical,” while others claimed the identity of Christ-follower instead of traditional labels. One member of the adult Sunday school explained, “*I think there are probably a lot of people that would say they’re Christian*, that’s their religion, *and I think Christ-follower is probably more descriptive of who I am and what I’m trying to be*.” This identity of Christ-following and the accompanying discourse on the differences between religion and Christianity surfaced in everyday conversations between church members, in sermons, and in most of the in-depth interviews that preceded the field experiments. It seems likely that it was this stated difference between Christianity and religion that was most reflected in the evangelicals’ word ratings, thus helping to explain why many evangelicals rated words like they did.

To summarize, the word ratings demonstrate some of the ways in which atheists and evangelicals view each other, and their corresponding categories, as different. Ingroups were associated with freedom and knowledge, while outgroups were associated with a variety of mainly negative words. Furthermore, the evangelicals also differentiated within their own ingroup between Christianity, which was viewed extremely positively, and religion, which was associated to various degrees with some negative traits. Both of these findings will be used in combination with the amount of time it took respondents to answer these questions to explore issues of dual-process cognition in the following section.

Results: Measuring System 1 and System 2 Processing

Besides data on the numerical ratings that respondents gave the 156 word pairings, data were also collected on the time it took the respondents to make a selection in each case. This allows judgments to be made as to what processing systems respondents used when they made their decisions, in a way similar to the many versions of the widely used Implicit Association Test (IAT) (Greenwald et al. 2009; Greenwald, McGhee, and Schwarz 1998). As previously discussed, the faster a response is made, the more one is able to infer that System 1 processing has been used with minimal input from System 2 processing.[17] Judgments that correspond to a respondent's worldview (i.e., easier judgments) should rely mainly on System 1 processing and be made relatively quickly, while more difficult judgments relying on both System 1 and System 2 are expected to take longer to make.

[17] It is of course true that, after System 1 processing, a response can be slow for reasons unrelated to processing (perhaps a temporary distraction, a misalignment of hand and computer, etc.). However, because one would expect these distortions to be unrelated to the content of a word pairing, stimuli that, on average, lead to longer processing times likely do so because they tend to invoke System 2 processes to replace or supervene System 1 processes.

One way to estimate the difficulty in making a particular judgment is to look at the interaction between a respondent's decision regarding whether or not a word applies to a target and whether or not the word being rated has a positive connotation for that person. For example, if the target word in a word rating experiment were "puppies" (a positive word), we would expect that it would take most people some System 2 processing to associate "disgusting" (a negative word) with puppies in a word experiment and override puppies' initial cuteness factor that causes them to generally be seen as positive. Thus, if we designed such a "puppy experiment," we would expect to find that it would take people longer to rate "disgusting" as being associated with even ugly puppies than a more positive word, such as "cute." Thus, response latency in combination with a given situation (applicability and positivity) potentially provide measurable insight into basic cognitive processes.

Following this reasoning creates two expectations concerning the data set generated from atheists and evangelicals. First, if different processing systems come into play at different times, one would expect systematic variation in response latencies. This variation would be dependent on group membership and the situation itself—in this case, the word pairing being rated. For example, consider an atheist who was asked to rate the degree to which a positive word describes "religion." If she responded that the positive word did, in fact, describe religion, we would expect this response to be slower than if the positive word were paired with "atheism." This is because her automatic reaction (System 1) as an atheist is to associate religion with being negative. To override this initial judgment, further System 2 processing is necessary and is associated with a longer response time. Conversely, if a negative word were paired with "atheism," one would expect a decision by the same respondent agreeing that the word described

atheism to also be made more slowly, as she would have to override the initial judgment of atheism being seen as positive.

Second, one would expect the evangelicals' negative attitude towards religion to be reflected in response times on pairings in which religion was the target. Remember that many of the evangelicals rated religion as being at least somewhat negative, as was seen in Figure 2.3, in which four-fifths of respondents referred to religion as being at least somewhat false. If this negative attitude towards religion has become an entrenched part of the evangelicals' habitus, then we would expect the response latencies when religion is the target to be more similar to those where atheism is the target than to those targeting Christianity (i.e., faster than average when rating negative words). However, if the move to differentiate between religion and Christianity is more deliberately made, then the response latencies when religion is the target might look more like those of Christianity (i.e., faster than average when rating positive words), as this would reflect an ingrained notion that religion is a positive entity.

To test these possibilities, the timing data on all response items was pooled for analysis. Data generated from response times usually has a pronounced skew (latencies have a lower limit but no upper one), so the timing data was transformed by taking its natural logarithm. It is also common for respondents in timed experiments to occasionally become distracted at some point while completing the exercise, leading to some response latencies being much longer than they would otherwise be (Fazio 1990). Two such cases were removed from the data because I observed the respondent respond to a distraction (e.g., answering a phone call) while answering a particular item. Other times, however, respondents may have become distracted when I could not identify them as such, and respondents sometimes became visibly distracted when I could not see the screen to know which item they were working on. There are no standard methods for dealing

with such cases. Often, arbitrary points are defined beyond which outlying data is either removed or converted to a maximum. I ran the models below both with and without such transformations. In particular, I tried removing observations of all times over 20 seconds, 10 seconds, 4 standard deviations from a respondent's mean, and 3 standard deviations from a respondent's mean, as well as converting observed response times above these points to a maximum, among others. The most drastic of these measures eliminated over one-sixth of the available cases. While all of these methods resulted in slightly different coefficients on the models below, none of them changed the substantive interpretation or judgments of statistical significance. Because of this robustness, and as any solution for dealing with outliers is an arbitrary choice made by the researcher, I decided to report the unmodified results.

Table 2.2 shows basic descriptive statistics for the response latencies in seconds, broken down by group and target. Generally, evangelicals took longer than atheists to answer in all categories and had greater standard deviations. However, much of this variation is due to one evangelical respondent who took much longer than most others on nearly all questions. Once this respondent is removed from the data set, the two groups' response latencies are closer together, although still significantly different from one another (t-tests, $p<0.05$, two-tailed), with evangelicals taking longer to answer. The models below were run both with and without including this respondent, with no difference in substantive interpretation or judgments of statistical significance. Because of this, and following the logic used for outliers on individual responses, the outlying respondent is included in all models reported.

Table 2.2. Descriptive statistics for response latencies in seconds
(all respondents included)

	Mean Time	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
Atheists				
All Categories	3.77	4.44	0.20	66.71
Atheism	3.36	3.43	0.87	53.86
Christianity	3.38	5.31	0.86	66.71
Religion	4.60	3.93	1.14	31.74
Spirituality	3.73	4.46	0.20	64.55
Evangelicals				
All Categories	4.36	5.31	0.37	105.74
Atheism	4.43	5.15	0.37	82.13
Christianity	3.30	4.16	0.84	58.69
Religion	5.50	5.41	0.57	46.55
Spirituality	4.20	6.10	0.86	105.74

In order to investigate the relationships between group membership and a given word pairing, I created a set of proxy variables for whether or not a respondent was likely to view a particular word as positive or negative. Because the overall word list contains several words, such as “Jesus,” that one group is likely to view as a positive word (i.e., evangelicals) but the other group is likely to view as a negative word (i.e., atheists), two separate groups of positively codings were needed, one for each group. Ideally, one would have actual positively rating data from atheists and evangelicals on all 39 words in the exercise, but that was not available in this study. To approximate such a rating for each group, a word was considered more positive the more it applied to the ingroup. This was represented by creating a variable for each word that was simply the mean rating given to it by the respective group when they were rating their own target (i.e., atheists rating atheism; evangelicals rating Christianity). Thus, the most positive

word for atheists was “skeptical” (mean rating of 4.5 when applied to atheism) and the most negative words were tied among “Christ followers,” “close to God,” “God,” “Holy Spirit,” and “silly” (mean ratings of 1 when applied to atheism). For evangelicals, the most positive words were “Jesus,” and “faith” (mean ratings of 4.95 when applied to Christianity), while the most negative word was “false” (mean rating of 1.14 when applied to Christianity). The complete coding of the resulting positivity variables can be found in Appendix A, Table A.1.

Using these positivity variables, I built separate fixed-effect ordinary least squares (OLS) models for each group that were mean centered for each respondent:

$$D_{ip} = \alpha + \beta_1 \text{applicability}_{ip} + \beta_2 \text{positivity}_g + \beta_3 \text{applicability}_{ip} \times \text{positivity}_g + \varepsilon$$

in which D_{i_p} is the mean centered variable, equivalent to fixed effects, created by taking the difference between the natural logarithm of the time it took for a respondent *i* to answer word pairing *p* and the mean of natural logarithms of the response latency for respondent *i* across all 156 word pairings; $applicability_{i_p}$ is the rating a respondent gave to answer the degree to which a particular word describes the target: (1) not at all, (2) a little, (3) moderately, (4) quite a bit, or (5) extremely; $positivity_g$ is the positivity score for the word being rated based on the respondent’s group membership, as described above; $applicability_{i_p} \times positivity_g$ is the product term for applicability and positivity; α is the intercept; and ε is an error term. Table 2.3 shows the regression estimates for atheists, while Table 2.4 shows the regression estimates for evangelicals. Each table displays separate models for the four targets of religion, atheism, Christianity, and

spirituality. The "positivity" variable in each model corresponds to that group's measure for how positive a given word is.

Table 2.3. Atheists, OLS regression estimates of difference of natural log of response time to natural log of average response time

	(1) RELIGION	(2) ATHEISM	(3) CHRISTIANITY	(4) SPIRITUALITY
Intercept	0.953*	-1.007*	0.583*	-0.034
	(0.103)	(0.080)	(0.122)	(0.084)
Applicability	-0.243*	0.456*	-0.234*	-0.004
	(0.037)	(0.043)	(0.034)	(0.034)
Positivity	-0.156*	0.429*	-0.212*	0.019
	(0.037)	(0.048)	(0.042)	(0.037)
Applicability x Positivity	0.069*	-0.153*	0.084*	0.001
	(0.014)	(0.014)	(0.017)	(0.016)
R^2	0.121	0.164	0.066	0.002

Notes: The dependent variable in each model is specified under the model number. Unstandardized coefficients. n = 780 for all models. Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.001 (two-tailed)

The pattern that emerges is striking. With the exception of atheists rating "spirituality," all of the interaction terms in all models are statistically significant. The direction of these interaction terms represent the effect on response latency as words are rated as applying more to their target and are considered to be more positive. Positive coefficients mean that it took respondents longer than their average to answer on an item, while negative coefficients mean that respondents answered faster than their average response latency. We see in Table 2.3 that the combination of rating and positivity predicts the atheists to be slower than their average

answering positively in models 1 and 3 (religion and Christianity targets) yet faster than their average in model 2 (atheism target). This suggests that the atheists are relying on more System 1 than System 2 processing when they rate a positive word as applying to atheism and the reverse with religion and Christianity. Model 4 (spirituality target) does not lead to any significant results, most likely because the concept of "spirituality" is an extremely fuzzy term in general society (Ammerman 2013) and which therefore varied in meaning greatly among the atheist respondents.

Table 2.4. Evangelicals, OLS regression estimates of difference of natural log of response time to natural log of average response time

	(1) RELIGION	(2) ATHEISM	(3) CHRISTIANITY	(4) SPIRITUALITY
Intercept	0.081	0.848*	-0.845*	-0.525*
	(0.122)	(0.116)	(0.118)	(0.113)
Applicability	0.110†	-0.202*	0.242*	0.190*
	(0.043)	(0.034)	(0.044)	(0.043)
Positivity	0.188*	-0.230*	0.316*	0.258*
	(0.041)	(0.030)	(0.058)	(0.043)
Applicability x Positivity	-0.069*	0.063*	-0.097*	-0.084*
	(0.012)	(0.010)	(0.014)	(0.012)
R^2	0.117	0.075	0.080	0.094

Notes: The dependent variable in each model is specified under the model number.
Unstandardized coefficients. n = 780 for all models, except religion (n=778).
Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.001 (two-tailed); †p < 0.05 (two-tailed)

Among evangelicals, as seen in Table 2.4, the pattern for religion, atheism, and Christianity is reversed. In model 3, in which Christianity is the target, as a word is rated as more applicable to Christianity, and as it is more positive, the answer is faster. This indicates that System 1 processing is likely being used with relatively little input from System 2 processing. Interestingly, this pattern also holds in model 1 when religion is the target as well, suggesting that although it is common in the evangelical community to see Christianity as good and religion as bad, this distinction is not engrained in the habitus to the same extent that, for example, an atheists' rejection of religion is. Instead, model 1 for evangelicals looks much like model 3. Meanwhile, the coefficients are also statistically significant in model 4 (spirituality), unlike for the atheists. The interaction term in model 4 is again negative, just like the interaction terms in model 3 (Christianity) and model 1 (religion). This is likely because "spirituality," for evangelicals, was probably understood as referring to Christian spirituality, in particular, and not as the fuzzy way spirituality is often understood in the general population. This interpretation is consistent with the way words like "spiritual" and "spirituality" were used by people at the church during the participant observation phase of the project.

The patterns shown in the tables can be more easily seen when represented graphically. Figure 2.4 shows atheists' predicted response time in seconds when rating the degree to which a word describes religion.[18] The *x* axis represents the degree that a respondent said a word describes "religion" (applicability), and the *y* axis represents the degree to which the word being rated is positive or negative (positivity). Darker areas in the graph represent longer predicted

[18] Figures 4 and 5 are based on basic OLS models predicting the natural logarithm of response latency when "religion" is the target. Non-fixed effects models were used as the basis of these figures because the transformation of the dependent variable required to estimate fixed effects prevents conversion back to seconds. The results of these models mirror those of the fixed effects models and can be found in Appendix A, Table A.2 and A.3.

response times and lighter areas represent faster response times. The bottom right corner of the graph is white, illustrating that when atheists rate words as applying to religion, the more negative the word, the faster respondents answered. The lower left corner is black, illustrating the opposite: the less a negative word applies to religion, the longer it took respondents to answer.

Figure 2.4. Raters: atheists; Target: religion; predicted response latency (seconds)

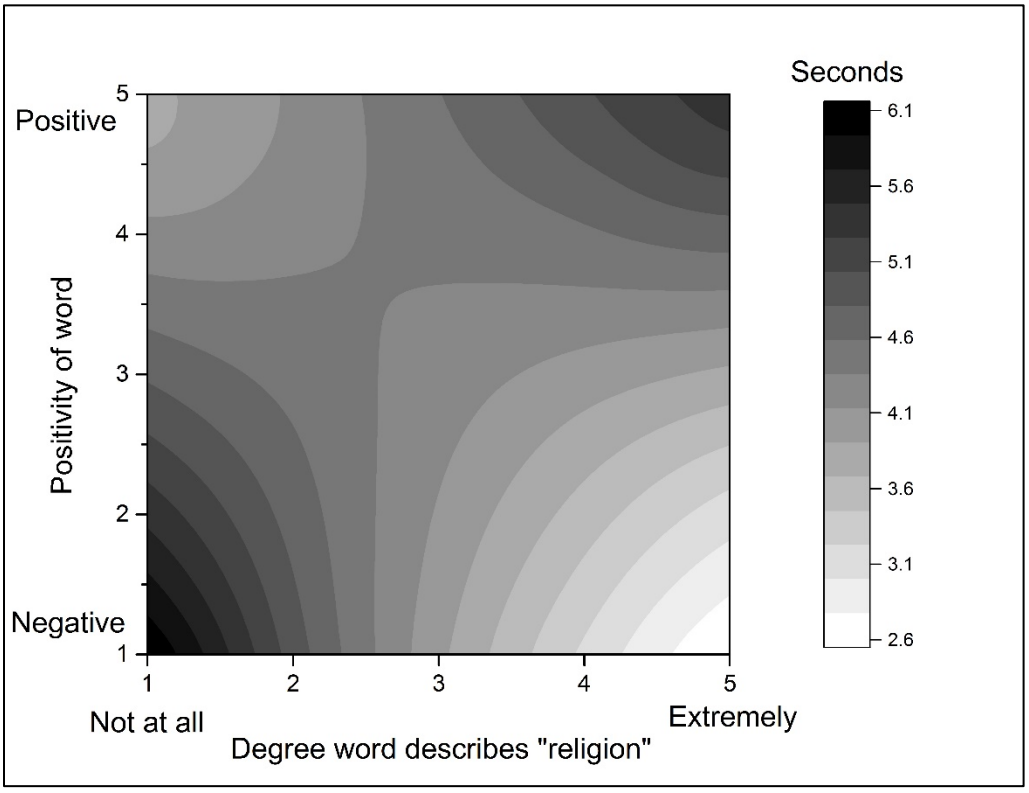
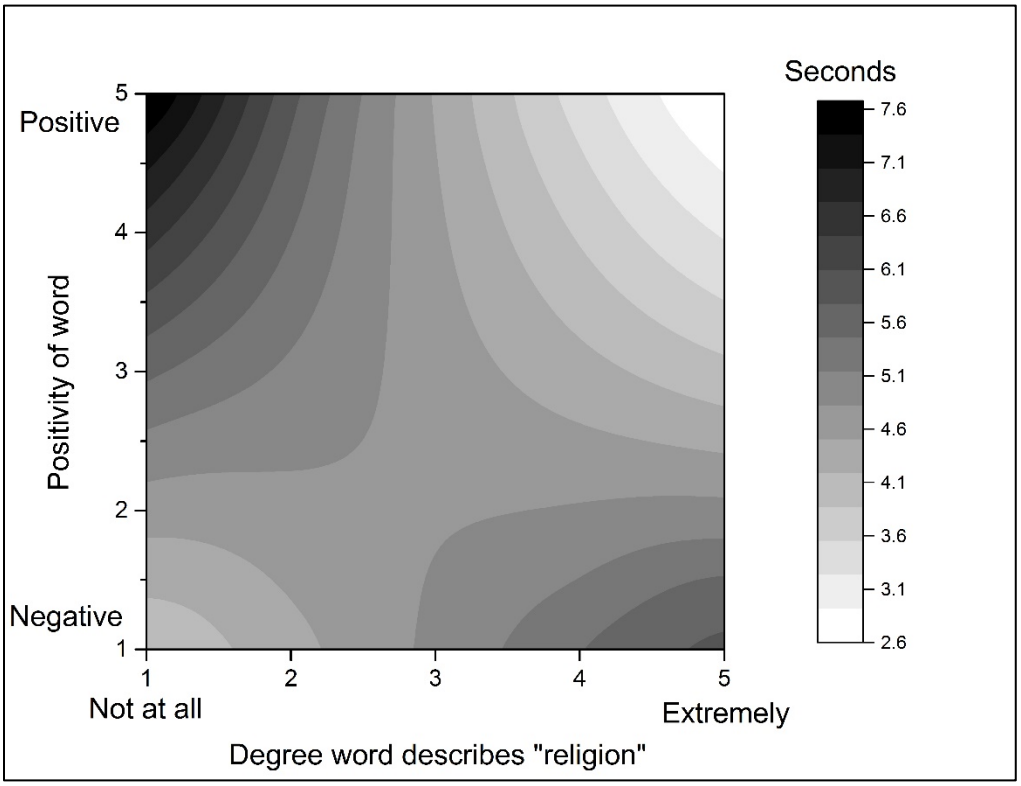


Figure 2.5 shows the same situation but for the evangelical respondents: namely, the evangelicals' predicted response time in seconds when rating the degree to which a word describes religion. Here, the upper right corner is white, indicating that the more a positive word applied to religion, the faster the respondents answered. The upper left corner is black, indicating that as a positive word was not applied to religion, it took respondents longer to answer.

Figure 2.5. Raters: evangelicals; Target: religion; predicted response latency (seconds)



In summary, the timing data reveals that there were differences on identical questions, based on group membership, in when fast and slow processing was used. People relied more on System 1 processing when saying positive words applied to their ingroup but needed additional System 2 processing to rate positive words as applying to their outgroup. Interestingly, the evangelicals' timing pattern for words applied to religion was similar to the pattern seen in words applied to Christianity, despite differences in the actual ratings given and attitudes expressed during interviews and witnessed during participant observation. This suggests that the Christ-followers' discourse on religion being harmful and different from true Christianity may not be as ingrained into their habitus as the basic idea that religion is good, which they likely have learned since childhood.

Conclusions

Until now, sociologists who have engaged with dual-process theories of cognition have primarily done so on a theoretical level, sidestepping most empirical questions of what processing engages when. As the original psychological literature shows, the interaction between System 1 and System 2 processing is not as simple as the distinction between answering a closed survey question and an open-ended, in-depth interview probe. One way that differences in processing can be observed, however, is by measuring response time. Measuring response time gives us real indications of which processes were likely involved in a decision; faster latencies indicate System 1 processing without much System 2 involvement, while slower latencies indicate some combination of System 1 and System 2 processing. This interpretation of the meaning of response latencies is supported by cognitive science and should hold under both the parallel and default interventionist models of dual-process theory.

Importantly, measuring response latencies can lead to widely different findings than one would obtain by simply assuming that closed questions reveal the System 1 process at work. Without the timing data, it would have been easy to have incorrectly concluded that *all of the responses* to the 156 ratings that each individual completed reflected System 1 processing and that this System 1 processing drove people's actions. That would have in turn indicated that the evangelical respondents' tendency to talk about religion as negative—observed during participant observation, recorded during in-depth interviews, and seen in the survey-like task ratings—was deeply ingrained in the identity of these Christians and likely driving their moral choices. However, when the response latencies in answering these questions are examined, we find that this is not necessarily the case. While the evangelical respondents in this study often talked about religion in negative terms, their reaction times when answering questions about it

appear to show that it took more cognitive effort, and System 2 processing, for them to do so. This fact suggests that the settings in which religion is talked about as being negative are much more nuanced and complex than the either/or approach would have indicated.

These findings further imply that measuring aspects of cognition is a useful and viable tool in sociological research. Such measurements can be used to help untangle complex expressions of cultural identities, such as those involved with religion, but also in other areas like race, gender, sexuality, et cetera. In the words of Shepherd (2011), “Cognitive associations are as much a part of understanding culture as are self-reported attitudes. These associations, and the situations in which they are activated, are a basic feature of meaning” (p. 139). If sociologists take seriously the idea that identities are multifaceted and context specific, it is necessary to look at the ways that different aspects of people’s identity are expressed in daily life. Examining the relationship between identity and cognition is one step in this direction, especially as it is not possible, even during participant observation, to be ever-present to observe all situations when certain identities are most salient. Yet, we can make inferences about the situations when identities associated with System 1 and System 2 processing might be more likely to come to the fore. Namely, "easy" situations likely draw mainly on System 1 processing, while more difficult situations most likely require the use of both System 1 and System 2 processing. Hypotheses based on these assumptions can then be tested using timed response data. Exploring the resulting difference can help researchers understand expressions of complex identities, such as evangelicals who identified as Christ-followers’ expressed dislike of religion under certain circumstances.

This must not be misinterpreted to mean that cognitive research reveals people’s “true” identity, while other methods, such as standard self-reports, in-depth interviews, and

ethnography, do not. The fact that the evangelical Christians in this study appeared to require the use of slower cognition to disassociate positive words from religion, for example, does not mean that their talk of religion being negative was false or disingenuous. Differentiating Christ-following from religion is a very real and important expression of identity, as well as a rhetorical move, for the individuals who adopt the term. Yet, "religion" has a different meaning in everyday conversation that clearly includes the Christ-followers as religious. In this quotidian version of the term, religion also has a generally positive connotation in American society, and the Christ-followers have been exposed to it throughout their entire lives. Such dispositions learned over the life course are difficult to entirely escape—and it takes cognitive effort to do so—much in the same way that the IAT has demonstrated lingering latent racial bias in certain aspects of the cultural environment (Shepherd 2011). These latent dispositions can continue to influence people, even those who have explicitly stated opinions at odds with them. But the Christ-followers appear to want to do the work necessary to overcome these initial associations because it fits with the model of who they are striving to be—namely, biblically based Christians who are focused on Jesus. The information about which aspects of identity are associated with System 1 and System 2 processing simply help us to better understand, in conjunction with more traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies, the interplay between different aspects of identity, specific interactions, and the cultural environment in which these identities are expressed.

CHAPTER 3. IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER: THE INTERPLAY OF RELIGION AND POLITICS IN CREATING THE FIELD OF RELIGION

Scholars have recently suggested that in order to understand religion's influence we need to focus on "complex religion," i.e., the way religion intersects with race/ethnicity, gender and class (Edgell 2017; Edgell and Tranby 2007; Frost and Edgell 2017; Wilde and Glassman 2016). Building on this idea of intersectionality as applied to the *effects* of religion, I propose that we need to examine similarly complex interactions for understanding the architecture of the religious field itself. In other words, instead of simply taking the concepts of religion and the field of various religions for granted, it may be useful to examine the intersections of these categories with other areas of social life to consider how they may mutually constitute one another. Considering the recognized political nature of many religious positions (for reviews, see Grzymala-Busse 2012; Wilde and Glassman 2016), it could be particularly fruitful to start such a project by probing areas where religion and politics intersect. Such an investigation has the potential to increase our knowledge about how groups of people imagine and organize the overall field of religions, while at the same time considering the ways that the religious field might be influenced by the political.

In this study I take the first steps in such an investigation by administering a set of field experiments to self-identified atheists and evangelical Christians in the Bible Belt. These experiments required respondents to sort cards representing religions, religious denominations and secular viewpoints into groups that "go together." The cards were then sorted by the same respondents a second time, but in the second sort the respondents were instructed to group them based on the items' relationship to politics. The resulting analysis allows us to estimate how members of these groups imagine the field of religions as a whole, both independently and when asked to take political positions into account. The results indicate that 1) politics is deeply

intertwined with people's understanding of the religious field; 2) the significance of politics to cognitive maps of the field of religions is relationally defined—people use politics to place their outgroups in the field but rely primarily on relations within the religious field to place themselves.

Background

Recent sociological research on religion and politics has investigated how religious beliefs, behaviors and identities affect political positions and actions (e.g. Brint and Abrutyn 2010; Grzymala-Busse 2012; Pelz and Smidt 2015; Schmidt and Miles 2017; Wilde and Glassman 2016; Wilkins-Laflamme 2017), as well as the forms of political activity undertaken by religious actors (Chaves 2003; Grzymala-Busse 2012; Kucinskas 2014; Wilde and Glassman 2016). Generally speaking, most sociological studies involving politics treat religion as an independent variable that can influence politics in a variety of ways. In these studies, the authors usually approach the category of "religion" in general, and individual religions in particular, as if they were clear categories of analysis. Further, it is typically assumed that these categories are clear for people in their everyday lives, as well.

There are indications, however, that these assumptions are flawed, implying that we should investigate the field of religion more closely, paying special attention to its relationship to politics (Edgell 2012). Scholarship on "everyday religion," for example, has shown how varied and contextual people's understandings of religion can be (e.g., Ammerman 2007; Bender 2003, 2010; Besecke 2005; Engelke 2012; Hall 1997; Hirschkind 2006; Hurd 2008; Lichterman 2008; Mahmood 2005; Moore 2017a; Orsi 2005; Smilde 2006; Sullivan 2005, 2009). There are also pockets of scholarship dealing with religion and politics that help us move beyond the variable

paradigm associated with much of the sociological work on religion and which suggest that the fields of religions and politics may be closely intertwined indeed. For example, people often compromise both religious and political values when they come into conflict with one another (Rhodes 2011), suggesting that these fields, at least in part, may be mutually constituted. Politics and religion blur in areas of civil religion (Bellah 1967; Williams 2013), and certain religious positions are bound up with the idea of a Christian nation (e.g., Whitehead, Perry, and Baker 2018; Whitehead and Scheitle 2017). Even political scientists are beginning to consider the idea religion and politics can influence each other in important ways (Grzymala-Busse 2012).

The bidirectional influence of politics and religion may be especially salient if one views politics as fundamentally relational to begin with, taking the view that people being categorized into groups of allies and adversaries is inherent to the concept of politics itself (Martin and Desmond 2010; Schmitt 1996). Such a view of the political resonates with the community aspects of religion and other forms of identity, which also inherently imply a division between those within the community and those outside of it. It is perhaps unsurprising that political and religious identities have a strong relational component considering that the creation of the self is fundamentally a product of interaction with others (Cooley 1967; Mead 1956). The importance of examining relational effects quickly becomes apparent when looking at the interaction between religion and politics empirically. There is evidence, for example, that religion and civic identity intermix relationally to define the boundaries of group membership (Lichterman 2008). Thus, there is ample reason to expect that cognitive maps of the overall field of religions could also vary relationally; people might literally see the field differently depending on how the individual positions that they are examining relate to their own understanding of the position they occupy in the field.

Field Experiment: Card Sorts

To examine how the shape of the field of religions might be influenced by politics, a card sorting field experiment was designed. This exercise was part of a larger ethnographic project investigating how self-identified atheists and evangelical Christians in Oklahoma and Chicago conceive of the category of religion. Ethnographic fieldwork suggested that both atheists and evangelicals held complicated cognitive maps of the field of religions. For example, while members of the atheist groups studied were generally fairly hostile towards most religions, some religions were clearly more acceptable than others. A small number of atheists from an Oklahoma fieldsite occasionally attended local Unitarian Universalist churches, while at the same time remaining quick to mock the more theologically and politically conservative denominations that dominated the state. Atheists at this site also shared a common political perspective, with nearly all members being politically liberal, or occasionally, mildly libertarian. People at the evangelical churches included in the study, meanwhile, also shared a common political perspective, but in this case that perspective was conservative instead of liberal. As evangelical Christians, they naturally expressed a clear preference for protestant Christianity, but often differentiated further between those who were seen to "follow Christ" and those who deviated from what they saw as correct Christian beliefs and practices (see Chapter 2 and Moore 2017a for a detailed explanation of "Christ-following").

In order to explore these ethnographic findings in more detail, a pair of complementary card sorting exercises was designed. Card sorts are a useful way to map the field of a particular cognitive domain (Bernard 2011; Coxon 1999; Weller and Romney 1988). In the basic procedure, people are given a stack of cards with names or pictures on them and are asked to sort

the cards into any number of groups that "go together." The resulting data can then be analyzed quantitatively, with statistical techniques like multi-dimensional scaling, as well as qualitatively, by investigating the resulting piles in detail and examining the transcripts of people's explanations of why they sorted the cards like they did.

Populations

The card sorts were conducted with the members of an atheist organization and an evangelical church in the same metropolitan area of Oklahoma. The atheist group, Prairie Atheists, is loosely organized with approximately 2,400 members at the time of the field experiments, although only a small percentage of those attended in-person meetings. Meetings occurred up to fifteen times per month and were mostly social occasions where small groups of atheists met for informal events such as lunch or a bar trivia night. Most attendees were white, although there were occasionally African Americans and Latinos in attendance as well. The group was approximately sixty percent male and spanned a wide range of ages, from young people in their late teens and early twenties to retired individuals in their sixties and seventies.

The church included in this field experiment was a white evangelical congregation affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention called Maple Street Baptist. Weekly attendance at worship services averaged around 1,200 individuals during the study period. Fieldwork at the church was conducted primarily with the members of an adult Sunday school that met before worship on Sundays. This class was mainly comprised of married couples in their thirties or forties and served as a defacto evangelical small group for many of its members.[1] Attendance at

[1] An evangelical "small group" is group of people who meet regularly to help each other along their faith journeys.

the class was usually around fifteen people any given Sunday, although the total number of people affiliated with the class was much higher. Some participants in the field experiments were also recruited from a similar Sunday school class that split off to focus on married couples in their twenties. There were no substantive differences in the results reported between how members of the two classes completed the field experiments.

Respondents were chosen to match as closely as possible an earlier in-depth interview phase of the larger study, although this sample does not match the previous sample exactly. Most field experiment interviews took place in public spaces, such as coffee shops and restaurants, although some took place in respondents' homes or offices, as well. The author administered all field experiments between September 2015 and June 2016. The final sample was N = 41 (atheists: N=21; evangelicals: N=20).[2] Following Coxon and Jones (1978), depth of the data was prioritized over sample size. For the purposes of this experiment race, class, and gender were bracketed for the analysis as the two groups were roughly equivalent on these measures.[3]

Methods: Card Sorts

A list of 43 items was created for respondents to sort. The list included so-called world religions, religious denominations, and secular labels. The Christian denominations were

[2] There is one more respondent for the atheists than for the evangelicals because of an error in an earlier field experiment that was given at the same time as the card sorts. Because the data from the first field experiment in the package was lost for a single atheist respondent, an additional atheist respondent was added so that the first experiment would have an N = 20 for the atheists. This means that the rest of the experiments, including the card sorts, have an N = 21 for the atheist respondents. All of the field experiments conducted with evangelicals have an N = 20.

[3] Approximately 66 percent (14/21) of the atheist respondents were men, while 60 percent (12/20) of the evangelical respondents were men. Future research could explore the intersection of religion with categories like race, class, and gender by using new card sorts and similar methods to those in this paper.

selected to represent both major denominations in the United States as well as a mix of theologically conservative, moderate, and liberal churches, and both historically white and historically black churches. The full list of items sorted can be found in Table 3.1. The column "Variable" contains the shortened name used in the figures in this article; the column "Full Name" displays the item names as they were printed on the cards that the respondents sorted.

Instead of sorting physical cards, respondents sorted the items on the touchscreen of a tablet computer. A commercial online card sorting interface was used for this purpose.[4] Respondents sorted the items on the touchscreen using either a stylus provided or with their finger. Before beginning the card sort of religions and denominations, each person first completed a short practice sort of eight cards labeled with the names of various kinds of produce. The practice sort allowed respondents to get the feel of working with the cards on the tablet. It also offered them the opportunity to ask any questions about the interface or the general sorting procedure before the actual card sort began.

[4] The interface was created by Optimal Workshop, a New Zealand company that specializes in developing tools that firms can use to better understand their customers, especially in the area of website user experience research (UX). https://www.optimalworkshop.com

Table 3.1. Items included in the card sorts

Variable	Full Name	Variable	Full Name
AGNOSTIC	Agnosticism	M_SUNNI	Sunni Muslim
AME	African American Episcopal Church	NAC	Native American Church
AOG	Assemblies of God	NAZARENE	Nazarene
ATHEISM	Atheism	NBC	National Baptist Convention
BAHAI	Baha'i Faith	NONDENOM	Non-denominational Christian
BUDDHISM	Buddhism (Mahayana)	ORTHODOX	Orthodox Christianity
CATHOLIC	Catholic Church	PCUSA	Presbyterian Church (USA)
COC	Churches of Christ	PENTECOSTAL	International Pentecostal Holiness Church
COGIC	Church of God in Christ	PNBC	Progressive National Baptist Convention
CS	Christian Science	QUAKERS	Religious Society of Friends (Quakers)
DOC	Disciples of Christ	RASTA	Rastafarianism
ELCA	Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	SA	Salvation Army
EPISOCPAL	Episcopal Church	SATAN	Satanism
EVANCOV	Evangelical Covenant Church	SBC	Southern Baptist Convention
HINDUISM	Hinduism	SCIE	Scientology
HUMAN	Humanism	SHINTO	Shinto
JEWISH_C	Conservative Jewish	SIKHISM	Sikhism
JEWISH_O	Orthodox Jewish	TAOISM	Taoism
JEWISH_R	Reformed Jewish	UMC	United Methodist Church
JW	Jehovah's Witnesses	UU	Unitarian Universalist Association
LDS	Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons)	WICCAN	Wiccan
M_SHIA	Shia Muslim		

After the practice sort was completed, a screen appeared with preliminary instructions for the first sort of interest. Respondents were verbally informed that this sort worked like the practice sort, except for the fact that I would ask them to explain verbally why they sorted the cards like they did after they had completed the sort. The following written instructions were shown on the screen:

> On the next page, you'll be asked to sort a set of groups into piles that you feel go together. Some of the groups are religions or religious denominations. Others are groups or organizations that are opposed to religion. There's no right or wrong answer.
>
> It's ok if you're not familiar with all of the differences between these denominations. Just do your best to create groups that make sense to you.

Respondents also entered an ID number that I gave them into a short text box in order that I could later identify which participants made which sort. After they had entered their ID number, asked any remaining questions and were ready to begin, respondents were instructed to tap a button labeled "Continue." The next screen contained the sorting interface itself, as well as detailed instructions:

> Step 1: Carefully read through the entire list of items to the left.
>
> Step 2: After you have read through all of the items, please sort them into groups that make sense to you. There is no right or wrong answer. Just do what comes naturally. To begin, drag an item from the left into this area to create your first group.

On the left side of the screen, all forty-three cards were listed in random order. Once respondents dragged the first card onto the blank sorting space, additional instructions appeared on their screen:

> Step 3: Tap the title to rename your group.
>
> Step 4: Add more items to this group by dropping them on top of it. Make more groups by dropping them in unused spaces. You can also move items from one group to another if you change your mind about where an item belongs. When you're done, *but before you hit "Finished,"* let Rick know and he'll ask you some questions. Have fun!

In order to ensure that no one accidently hit the “Finished” button—which advanced the sequence to the next screen—before they explained to me why they sorted the cards the way that they did, I placed a small piece of cardstock (approximately 2.5 cm x 4 cm) over the “Finished” button, which was located on the upper right-hand corner of the tablet screen.

After respondents notified me that they were done sorting the items, I started a digital voice recorder and asked them to briefly explain to me why they sorted the cards the way that they did. Once their explanations were complete, I removed the cardstock and allowed the respondents to hit “Finished,” which advanced the screen to the second sort. After again entering their ID number, they were given on-screen instructions virtually identical to the open sort, except that this time they were asked to sort items into groups that “go together based on their relationship to politics.” Respondents were also verbally told that this second sort worked like the first one except that they were being asked to sort the cards based on their relationship to politics. If anyone asked for further clarification on what was meant by “politics,” they were told that the instructions referred to “politics in general,” and that they should sort the cards according to whatever politics meant to them. The cardstock was used again to make sure that no one hit “Finished” before they had a chance to explain their sorts to me. After respondents finished sorting the cards for the second time, I started the digital recorder and asked them to explain to me briefly why they sorted the cards the way that they did. Screenshots of the software interface used for the card sort can be found in Appendix B.

Raw data consisting of the specific piles that respondents created was transformed into a 43 x 43 co-occurrence matrix using SynCaps software.[5] The Proscal package within SPSS was then used to conduct a multi-dimensional scaling (MDS) analysis of the data.[6] MDS is a statistical technique that takes similarity data and represents it graphically in *n*-dimensional space (Borg, Groenen, and Mair 2005, 2012). In the case of the card sorts, the similarity data comes from how often particular cards are sorted into the same piles across respondents (i.e., the co-occurrence matrix). The MDS algorithm then plots these similarities as coordinates where items that are similar to one another (i.e., items that tended to be placed together in the same groups in the card sorts) are located closer together while items that are different from one another (i.e., items that were rarely placed in the same groups) are further apart. Solutions were tried using both 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional plots; while the 3-dimensional plots fit the data somewhat better (i.e., had lower Stress 1 values), the basic groupings and interpretations of the data did not change from the 2-dimensional plots, and therefore only the 2-dimensional plots are reported for ease of interpretation. This basic procedure was followed for the analysis of all of the following card sorts.

Results: Open Sort

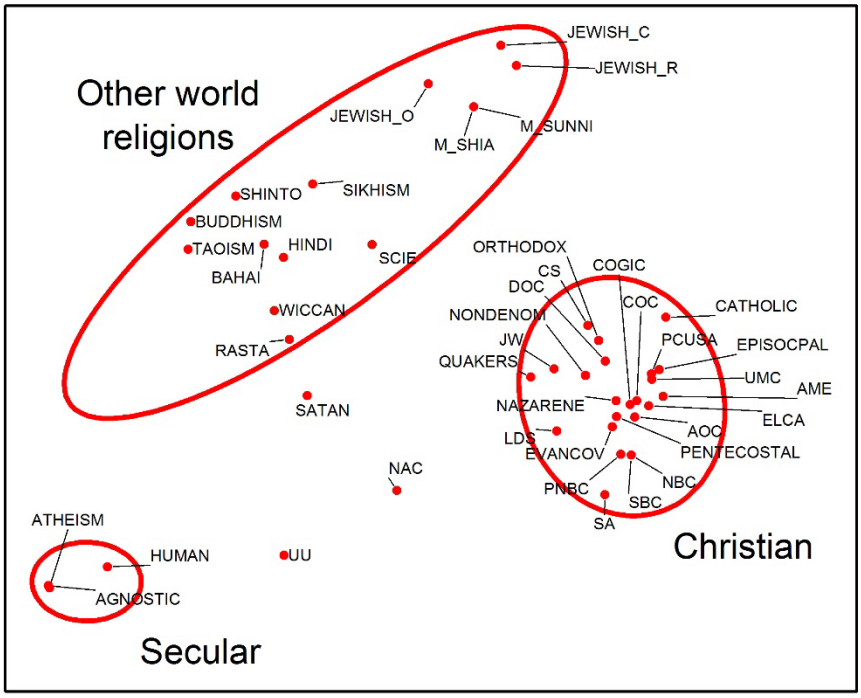
The twenty-one respondents from Prairie Atheists completing the open sort created a total of 155 categories, with the mean number of categories per respondent being 7.4 (SD = 3.3). On

[5] SynCaps software is designed specifically for analyzing card sort data. http://www.syntagm.co.uk/design/cardsortdl.shtml

[6] The initial configuration of items plotted was chosen by running 10,000 random starts and then using the start that had the lowest normalized raw stress as the starting point for the MDS algorithm. Proscal was set to give the same order to proximities as the original proximities, and to allow tied proximities to become untied.

average, atheist respondents took 15.3 minutes (SD = 8.5) to complete the open sort, including the time it took to verbally explain their responses. Figure 3.1 shows the groupings that resulted from plotting the data generated from the open sort by members in Prairie Atheists in 2 dimensions. It suggests that the atheist respondents as a whole tended to view the religious field as divided into three major groupings: Christian, other world religions, and secular. The Christian grouping included a wide variety of denominations from the Catholic to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (LDS). The world religion grouping was also quite diverse and contained Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as some new religious movements (e.g., Wicca and Rastafarianism). The secular grouping was limited to atheism, agnosticism, and humanism. Interestingly, religions such as the Unitarian Universalists, Satanism, and the Native American Church fell outside of these three major groupings and lay in between the secular and religious areas of the field. Overall, Figure 3.1 suggests that the atheist respondents' mapping of the religious field is broken up into the secular, which stands in opposition to religion, which in turn is broken up into Christianity and "everything else."

Figure 3.1. Atheist sort, open
The key for names in the figure can be found in Table 3.1. Stress 1 = 0.0832.



While the aggregate groupings of the open sort by the atheist respondents divides neatly into three, individual explanations about why people sorted the cards the way that they did were more varied. Table 3.2 summarizes the qualitative analysis of respondents' justifications for their sortings. A little over half of the atheist respondents (12/21) described their categories in terms that matched popular categories of world religions. As one respondent told me, "*Without filling the screen with a whole bunch of groups, I feel like we need to break it down to the basic groups. So Christian denominations, Jewish denominations, other theistic faiths*…." Approximately one-quarter of the respondents (5/21), however, talked about their categories in terms relating to being either more liberal or more conservative. Around one-quarter (5/21) also described their groups in terms of how "crazy" they appeared to the person sorting the cards. For example, one respondent used both the liberal/conservative dimensions and the crazy/sane dimensions when

describing her groupings. "*I grouped all these because they're kind of old, you know, very conservative type, and you know, have crazy beliefs (laughs).*" But around half of respondents (11/21) also described their categories in some other way entirely. One person, for example, explained his choices of groups by whether or not they were "*worth my time*." Another man described his groups based on how much he thought the religions interfered in people's lives. Often people would describe things in more than one way—for example, talking for a time about basic categories of world religion, then switching to describing their groupings in terms of how crazy the religions in certain categories were.

Table 3.2. Open sort, qualitative descriptions summary
Atheists: N=21; Evangelicals: N=20

Atheists

	World Religions	Crazy	Lib / Cons	Other	
Count	12	5	5	11	
Percent	(57%)	(24%)	(24%)	(52%)	

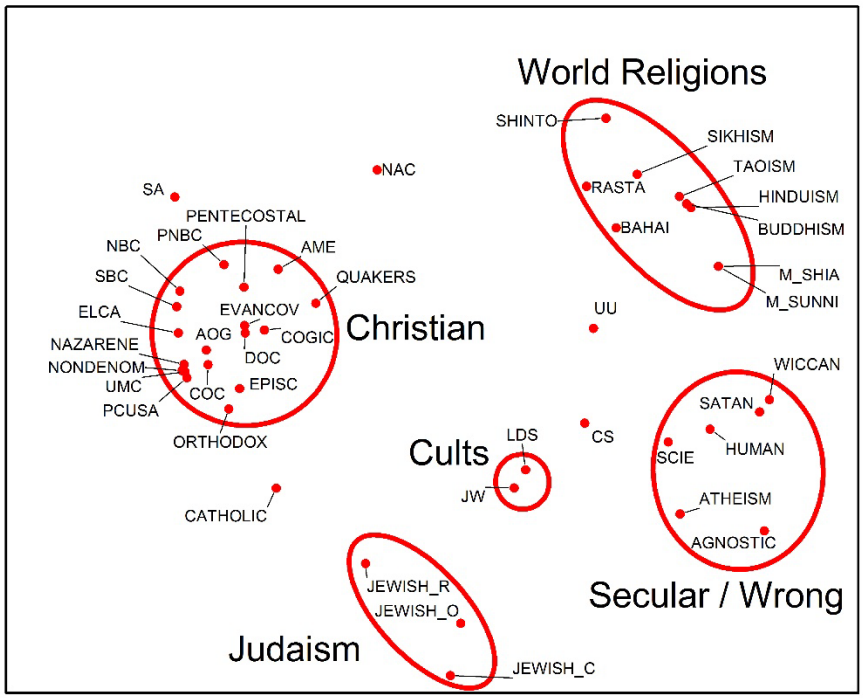
Evangelicals

	World Religions	Cults	Christian	Other	DK
Count	12	8	14	5	11
Percent	(60%)	(40%)	(70%)	(25%)	(55%)

The evangelical respondents, however, saw the field of religions differently than the atheists. The twenty respondents from Maple Street Baptist completing the open sort created a total of 172 categories, with the mean number of categories per respondent being 8.6 (SD = 4.2). On average, evangelical respondents took 13.6 minutes (SD = 5.1) to complete the open sort, including the time it took to verbally explain their responses. Figure 3.2 also shows the groupings that resulted from plotting the data generated from the open sort by members of Maple

Street Baptist in 2 dimensions. The grouping labeled "Christian" contains most Christian denominations. These included the churches that the evangelicals believed were most likely to potentially follow Christ in a way similar to (or at least not too far from) their own core beliefs. As one person who completed the sort told me, "*The first group over here is [made up of] churches that I believe, at the very core, follow … essential core Christian doctrine*." Notice that this group does not include the LDS Church, Jehovah's Witnesses, or Catholicism. The Jehovah's Witnesses and the LDS Church were described by several people as "*cults*;" these groups are often considered to be Christian in the general culture but were seen as too far removed from "true Christianity" to even bear that label for many of the evangelical respondents in this study. Catholics occupy an interesting position near the Christian groups, but also somewhat removed from them, mirroring the way that Catholics are often viewed as theologically deviant by evangelicals. The respondents from Maple Street Baptist also tended to separate Judaism from other world religions, suggesting that they see this religious tradition differently from the rest of non-Christian religions. The "Other world religions" category contains most of the remaining world religions with the notable exception of Judaism, which, as mentioned, finds itself grouped alone. I labeled the final grouping "Secular/Wrong." It contains atheism, agnosticism, humanism, as well as Satanism, Wicca, Scientology and Christian Science. These are some of the faith positions that many of my respondents were likely to find the most misguided, as do evangelicals in general (Pew Research Center 2014).

Figure 3.2. Evangelical sort, open
The key for names in the figure can be found in Table 3.1. Stress 1 = 0.0784.



Individual explanations of card sorts were slightly more homogeneous among the evangelical respondents than the atheist respondents. Table 3.2 summarizes the qualitative analysis of the evangelical respondents' justifications for their open sortings. A sizable majority (14/20) justified their categories with reference to the version of evangelical Christianity found at Maple Street Baptist. People did this in several ways: Some talked about denominations that were biblically based; others made reference to Jesus being the source of salvation or talked about denominations that shared core Christian principles. No matter the exact language used, however, these individuals all described some of their categories in terms of those who matched basic evangelical beliefs and those who did not. The second most common way to describe their sorts was using the language of world religions (12/20). Note that this roughly matches the proportion of atheist respondents who also described their sorts in the same way. As one man explained the choices he made in sorting the cards, *"I went to Eastern religions versus Western*

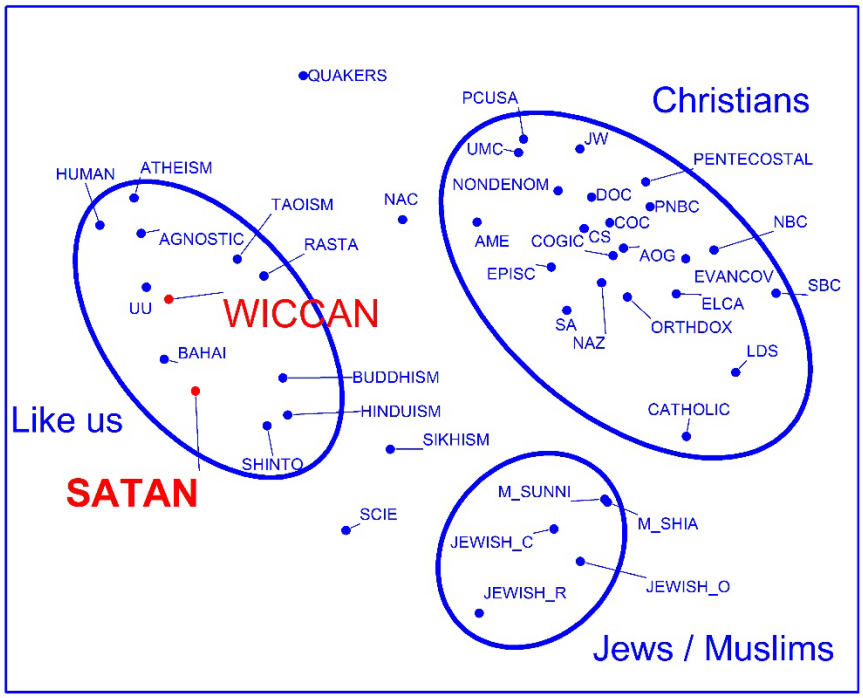
religions. You know, that's just basically kind of what you hear most of, culturally, but also where a lot of those things seem to come from." A little less than half of the evangelical respondents (8/20) made direct reference to "cults" when explaining their categories. One respondent made a group named "*Christian cultists*" that included Christian Science, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the LDS Church. He explained, "*Christian cultists are groups that people see as having a Christian identification, but I don't think that most of the mainstream accepts them as part of the mainstream*." Finally, a quarter of the evangelical respondents (5/20) used some other system to explain their categories. One person sorted religions by what they worshiped, while another respondent explained his piles with reference to the organizational types that he saw associated with particular religions or denominations (i.e., a group's ecclesiastical polity).

Results: Political Sort

For both atheist and evangelical respondents, the shape of their sorts in reference to politics looked different from their open sorts in important ways. Here the twenty-one respondents from Prairie Atheists created a total of ninety-three categories, with the mean number of categories per respondent being 4.2 (SD = 1.3). On average, atheist respondents took 10.9 minutes (SD = 4.0) to complete the politics sort, including the time it took to verbally explain their responses. Figure 3.3 shows the groupings that resulted from plotting the data generated from the political sort by members in Prairie Atheists in 2 dimensions. Again, there are three major groupings, but the members of those groups differ from those in the three groups of the open sort. This time the people "like us" group resulting from an aggregate analysis of the card sorts casts a much wider net than just the secular positions of atheism, agnosticism, and humanism. Most Eastern religions find themselves here, as well as Wicca and Satanism

(highlighted in red in Figure 3.3), which were before located much further from the secular cluster. There is no longer a world religion category; most non-Christian religions now find themselves grouped with the atheists, with the major exception of Judaism and Islam, which are now grouped together with each other. Christians generally remained together in the politics sort conducted by the atheist respondents.

Figure 3.3. Atheist sort, politics
The key for names in the figure can be found in Table 3.1. Stress 1 = 0.1264.



Prairie Atheist respondents described their categories in the political sort with more consistency than they did in the open sort. Table 3.3 summarizes the qualitative analysis of the respondents' justifications for their political card sort. Around two-thirds of respondents (14/21) talked about creating categories representing liberal through conservative ideological positions. As one man told me, "*It's the political spectrum, right? On the left you have the liberals, progressives, the middle of the road people, the moderates, and then to the right your*

conservatives." Just over half of the atheists also talked about either political involvement and/or influence when explaining their card sort. "*So I did it by how active they are. I don't really know everybody's stances on everything. I just know my awareness level*," explained one woman. A little over half of the respondents (12/21) talked about or created special categories for religions that were unfamiliar to them or for those religions that they did not know the likely political stance of its members. Three respondents made special reference to the politics of Muslims. Only 6 out of the 21 atheist respondents described their categories using some other system than those just listed.

Table 3.3. Politics sort, qualitative descriptions summary
Atheists: N=21; Evangelicals: N=20

Atheists

	Lib/Cons	Muslim	Involvement	DK	Other
Count	14	3	11	12	6
Percent	(67%)	(14%)	(52%)	(57%)	(29%)

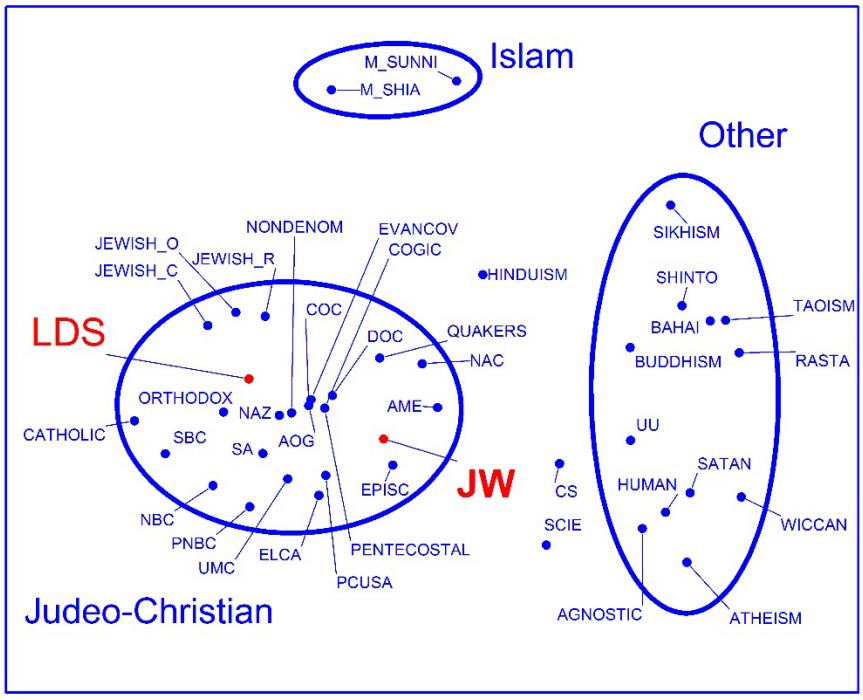
Evangelicals

	Lib/Cons	Muslim	Involvement	DK	Other
Count	8	11	7	8	11
Percent	(40%)	(55%)	(35%)	(40%)	(55%)

Again, when sorting based on politics, the members of Maple Street Baptist sorted their cards differently from members of Prairie Atheists, and differently than they did their open sort. The twenty respondents created a total of ninety-seven categories, with the mean number of categories per respondent being 4.9 (SD = 2.8). On average, evangelical respondents took 9.0 minutes (SD = 4.0) to complete the politics sort, including the time it took to verbally explain their responses. Figure 3.4 shows the groupings that resulted from plotting the data generated

from the political sort by members of Maple Street Baptist in 2 dimensions. In this sort, nearly all Christian denominations—including those that were referred to as "cults" in the open sort (highlighted in red in Figure 3.4)—are grouped together in a "Judeo-Christian" group. Interestingly, all three Jewish denominations are also in this group as well. Most other religions find themselves relatively close together in an "Other" grouping. This includes both Eastern traditions as well as secular standpoints and religions like Satanism and Wicca. The exception to this trend, of course, is Islam. Both Sunni and Shia Muslims find themselves far away from all other religions, suggesting that members of Maple Street Baptist see their politics as very different than the politics of any of the other religious positions included in this exercise.

Figure 3.4. Evangelical sort, politics
The key for names in the figure can be found in Table 3.1. Stress 1 = 0.1348.



The special status of Islam became even more apparent in evangelical respondents' explanation of their sorts. Table 3.3 summarizes the qualitative analysis of the evangelical

respondents' justifications for their political card sort. Slightly over half of the respondents (11/20) made Islam an explicit part of their explanations, either by creating a special category for Muslims or talking about Islam in a way that they did not speak of most other religions. Sometimes the Muslim religions were simply placed together, either alone or with one or two other religions, without further commentary. Other times they were placed in categories with names like "*violent*," "*radically conservative*," or "*theocratic*." At one extreme, open hostility towards Islam was expressed:

> *The Muslims are a little different though, because they're extremely hard to trust, because you don't know exactly—even the ones that tell you that they're on your side, it's like …(sighs) … you know what your book says, right? (laughs) Your book says lie your butt off to me. They don't have consistent truth. That's bothersome, because I can't rely on that character, honestly, because, I don't know … those Muslims are crazy. I don't know why they're doing that stuff. It's insane, it's sick.*

The other half of respondents who did not talk so explicitly about Islam while explaining their sorts sometimes placed them together with other religions and denominations they described as conservative but did not single them out in the way that other respondents did.

Significant minorities of evangelical respondents described their sorts using language that mirrored some of the same explanations used by the atheist respondents. Several people (8/20) talked about their categories in terms of a liberal/conservative spectrum. One person, for example, created only two groups describing them as, "*more liberal and more conservative politically*." Some people (7/20) talked about the political involvement of the religions they sorted, like the man who created three categories called "*more involved*," "*somewhat involved*," and "*less involved*." Others (11/20), like in the atheist group, talked about not knowing the politics of several of the religions in the card sort. But slightly over half of evangelical respondents (11/20) described their card sorts in ways that did not fit neatly with the descriptions

of their peers. For example, some talked about the politics of the items sorted according to regions of the world; another described how much the religions' politics were accepted, while another person made reference to whether or not they maintained (evangelical) Christian values.

Discussion

The atheist and evangelical respondents viewed the field of religions quite differently from one another in these exercises. On the aggregate level, members of Prairie Atheists divided the field into people like them (i.e., secular), Christians, and other religions. People from Maple Street Baptist also divided the field into people like them (i.e., Christians), the secular, and other religions, but created additional separate categories for Judaism and cults. Other faith positions seen as nondesirable to them, such as Satanism and Scientology, were grouped with the secular by these evangelicals. Both groups agreed that there were two basic divisions (us and them), although they recognized other, harder to pigeon-hole clusters. Examples of these harder-to-categorize groups include the Unitarian Universalists for the atheists; for the evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses and the LDS Church were located between Judeo-Christian and non-Judeo-Christian groups on the MDS plot. Interestingly, both atheists and evangelicals also disagreed about who the other side should be grouped with. The respondents from Maple Street Baptist on the aggregate placed atheists and Satanists together, while the atheists did not tend to place themselves with the Satanists to the same extent. Prairie Atheist respondents, meanwhile, grouped the LDS Church along with the other Christian denominations —in other words, for the atheists, the LDS Church belonged alongside evangelicals. This was sharply different than how people from Maple Street Baptist saw themselves.

The introduction of politics into the mix complicated these distinctions. For example, while the atheists did not group themselves with Satanism and Wicca in the open sort, they did so when sorting the cards based on politics. This suggests that while many of the atheist respondents see important differences between themselves and Satanists or Wiccans, they recognize that there is a shared political alignment between atheists and these groups. Judaism and Islam, meanwhile, were separated from the other non-Christian religions in the political sort in a way that they were not in the open sort. This could very well reflect a perception that there is something different and connected about these religious groups politically, perhaps having to do with the global politics of the Middle East. Evangelical respondents also sorted things differently in terms of politics than they did in the open sort. Unlike in their open sort, the evangelicals did not separate out Catholics, Jewish denominations, or Christian "cults," but instead grouped all Judeo-Christian religions near each other. Islam, however, was separated far away from all other secular and religious positions. This could also reflect the global politics of the Middle East. The separation of Judaism from Islam in both sorts, however, would also align with common evangelical theological understandings of the Jewish people's significance in the region. Atheism and agnosticism, meanwhile, remained near Satanism and Wicca.

Together, these card sorts suggest that *politics* plays a significant role in religious categorization, but that it does so through interaction with in-group and out-group status. When atheists and evangelicals categorized themselves—atheists categorizing atheists, and evangelicals categorizing Christians—they did so based on their perception of the religious field. Atheists placed themselves nearest to agnostics and humanists and away from nearly all other options in this exercise. From a theological standpoint, this choice makes sense as atheists, agnostics, and humanists tend to downplay the role of divinity and be generally opposed to

traditional religions. The evangelicals likewise placed most Christians together, but separated out the LDS Church and Jehovah's Witnesses (and to a lesser extent Catholics), groups that hold theologically deviant positions from the perspective of Maple Street Baptist attendees.

But when people categorized their religious "opposite,"—atheists categorizing evangelicals and vice versa—they did so based on the political field.[7] Atheists in their open sort placed all Christian denominations (i.e., their opposites) together, including the LDS Church and the Jehovah's Witnesses; this was exactly where both groups saw these denominations politically. The evangelicals likewise placed the atheists, agnostics, Satanists, Wiccans, humanists, and Scientologists together (i.e., their opposites) in the open sort. With the exception of Scientology, both atheists and evangelicals agreed that these religious groupings belonged together politically.

In sum, these card sorts suggest that it is the interaction politics and religion that is creating perceptions of the religious "other." Of course, important questions remain. Islam fits a slightly different pattern for both groups. Prairie Atheists and members of Maple Street Baptist both placed Islam alongside other world religions when only sorting the groups based on religion. However, both also separated Islam from most other religions in the politics sort, although atheists and evangelicals did so differently. Atheists saw a political affinity between

[7] While there is no such thing as real "opposites" in the field of religions, there is evidence that, at least in the United States, atheists and evangelicals would stand far apart were there an imaginary pole from very secular to very religious. Survey research has also suggested that white evangelicals' most disliked religious grouping is atheists, while for atheists the most disliked religious grouping is white evangelical Christians (Pew Research Center 2014). Interviews and ethnographic fieldwork in this project furthermore indicated that atheists and white evangelical Christians are both significant outgroups for each other.

Islam and Judaism, while evangelicals clearly saw Islam politically as a category by itself.[8] The status of Islam, both politically and religiously, is important to further explore.

Some of the patterns seen in the card sorts may also result from the fact that a common political stance, while not strictly necessary for membership in a religious or secular group, is likely an important factor for determining the composition of these groups. As mentioned in the section describing the Prairie Atheists and Maple Street Baptist samples, both groups had different, but internally homogenous, political ideologies. It would be easy, for example, to imagine that even a theologically conservative but politically liberal Christ-follower would feel uncomfortable at times in the conservative political environment of Maples Street Baptist. Likewise, a politically conservative atheist would likely feel very out of place in the politically liberal discussions that were common at Prairie Atheist events.[9] It seems probable that part of participation in a religious or secular group is often informally contingent on shared political ideology (or at least people's ideologies not being too far apart), which in turn creates an environment where politics helps to constitute the cognitive mappings of the religious.

[8] It may be noteworthy that atheists tended to place both Islam and Judaism near each other in the open sort as well, although in the same general vicinity of other non-Christian religions.
[9] It is known that atheists tend to be politically liberal, but at least one dataset suggests that up to 15 percent may self-identify as politically conservative (Baker and Smith 2015). During my fieldwork these mythical conservative atheists became my white whale. I occasionally asked attendees at atheist groups in both Oklahoma and Chicago if anyone knew a politically conservative atheist. While someone would occasionally tell me something like, "There was that one guy, but he doesn't come around anymore," in over two years of fieldwork I never actually met a politically conservative atheist that I knew about.

CHAPTER 4. SARDONIC ATHEISTS AND SILLY EVANGELICALS: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SELF-CONCEPT AND HUMOR STYLE

Humor has long been recognized as a mechanism for creating social solidarity within groups (e.g., Fine and DeSoucey 2005; Fominaya 2007; Kuipers 2008; Meyer 2000).[1] The exact nature of such humor, however, takes many forms, from biting sarcasm directed at outsiders to light self-deprecating jokes. Why do some groups tend to use potentially offensive humor directed at outsiders while others have cultures of comparatively harmless light banter? I suggest that the answer to this question lies in an interaction between self-concept, perceptions of outgroups, and micro group culture. Aspects of self-concept that are central for a group's identity work, especially how the group imagines outsiders, open possibilities for certain types of humor while at the same time closing off other potential humorous genres. Then micro-cultural processes, heavily dependent on the exact persons present in a given interaction, influence the humorous forms used. This process explains why groups in roughly similar structural positions often make use of humor to generate solidarity in strikingly different ways, as well as why styles of humor may also vary, within certain limits, inside a particular group.

I provide examples of this process by examining the humor in two religious minority groups with very different humorous styles: atheists in the Bible Belt and evangelical Christians in Chicago. Both groups share a sense of minority embattlement within the cultures of their respective regions and use humor to generate solidarity, but each group diverges sharply in its self-concepts and the types of humor used. The atheists' self-concept defines them as smart, rational, moral, and free people, while at the same time defining their primary outgroup, i.e.,

[1] This chapter is reprinted by permission from Springer Customer Service Center GmbH: Springer Nature *Qualitative Sociology* "Sardonic Atheists and Silly Evangelicals: The Relationship between Self-Concept and Humor Style," Rick Moore, 2018.

religious people, as fools, dupes, or at best, seriously misguided. This self-concept opens the possibility for solidarity-creating humor that is biting and potentially offensive, which quickly comes to the fore when outgoing personalities come together at group events. The evangelicals' self-concept, on the other hand, is that of people who recognize the truth of Christianity, and who are at the same time broken individuals striving to emulate Jesus Christ. The evangelicals see their primary outgroup, people who do not have a personal relationship with Jesus, as a people to feel sorry for. This shuts the door to most humor directed at their most significant outgroup and instead directs it inward at jokes about the self and the group as a whole. The more outgoing personalities then trigger the use of humor within specific interactions, which highlights the religiousness of the group within a secular environment.

Humor Styles and Self Concept

General theories of humor developed in psychology, linguistics, and discourse analysis, suggest that humor is related to the ideas of either incongruity, superiority, or release (see Attardo 2008; Raskin 1985; Martin 2007; Oring 2003). Incongruity theories stress that humor comes from differences between what is expected and what is perceived; superiority theories say that humor is related to feelings of superiority over a person or group; and release theories explain humor as a release from psychological tension. Sociological accounts of humor, meanwhile, are most often functional in nature (Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Humor has been seen to draw group boundaries, promote social cohesion, create group culture, cement group hierarchies, smooth out interactions, and serve as a means of social control (Abrams and Bippus 2011; Fine 1983; Fine and DeSoucey 2005; Fominaya 2007; Habib 2008; Kuipers 2008; Mulkay 1988; Robinson and Smith-Lovin 2001). Humor has also been recognized as a means of

protest, although some have questioned its efficacy in this regard (e.g., Huller 1983; Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014; Tsakona and Popa 2011), especially as humor can both challenge the status quo and reify it at the same time (Smirnova 2014). Overall, the solidarity and identity creation functions of humor have been especially prominent in many accounts across disciplines. Empirical examples are varied and range from the use of humor to create social cohesion in anti-capitalist groups (Fominaya 2007), to solidarity building among small groups of friends (Fine and Holyfield 1996; Habib 2008), as well as in the workplace (Holmes and Marra 2002). Interestingly, humor is capable of building solidarity even when people present do not get the joke (Terrion and Ashforth 2002) and can also serve as an implicit "understanding test" that polices the boundaries of group membership (Sacks, Bauman, and Sherzer 1974).

Sociological studies have also identified possible factors that may influence the kind of humor used in a given situation, such as the observation that humor is likely to be more biting when the target of the humor is not present (Fine 1984). Issues of power relations between individuals and groups likely influence the kind of humor used (Cundall 2012). Perceived threats to identity, for example, may lead towards more disparaging humor (Ferguson and Ford 2008). Outside groups that are perceived to have received their privileged position unfairly can become the target of jokes calling them stupid (Davies 1990). Such judgments are often harsher in conversational wit than in circulating narrative jokes (Davies 2010).

Recently, following Martin et al. (2003), several studies within psychology (e.g., Cann et al. 2008; Chen and Martin 2007; Stieger, Formann, and Burger 2011) have identified four humorous styles that are a combination of humor's function and effect: whether the humor is used to enhance the self, or enhance relationships with others; and whether the humor is benign,

or potentially detrimental.[2] This research on styles, however, treats styles as primarily individual phenomena, generally ignoring the specific social context within which humor takes place. The possibility that different groups in a given society might encourage certain kinds of humor and discourage others—in essence exhibiting their own group humor styles—is not addressed.

I propose that group humor styles do exist and that they vary on at least two dimensions: 1) humor's direction, i.e., whether or not the target of the humor is within the group; 2) and humor's severity, the degree to which the humor is either "biting" or innocuous. Stated differently, a group might develop a culture that makes fun of itself or of outsiders; likewise, the humorous culture of a group may be "all in good fun" or potentially mean and offensive. These dimensions differ subtly from those commonly found in the psychological literature as they are not intended to distinguish healthy from unhealthy humor. Additionally, they are to be understood as actual dimensions along which a group's humor can vary, not as simple cells in a two-by-two table (Martin et al. 2003). Groups might fall in the middle of this spectrum or gravitate towards particular poles. What might account for these kinds of differences? Building on this past work on the sociality of humor, I propose that the style of humor used in a group setting results from the interaction between group self-concept and micro-cultural processes dependent on who is present during a given interaction.

Individual self-concept can be defined as "the totality of a specific person's thoughts and feelings toward him- or herself as an object of reflection" (Owens, Robinson, and Smith-Lovin 2010:479; see also Rosenberg 1979). As such, one would expect self-concept to influence humorous styles (Kuipers 2015). For example, a person whose self-concept is deeply tied to

[2] These theories stem from a stated desire to explore the relation between individual humor styles and common psychometric measures of individual well-being. Other scholars have questioned this framework and the instruments used to measure it (Heintz and Ruch 2015).

being kind might be less likely to make a biting personal joke aimed at someone else than another person who thinks of herself as sarcastic. But beyond any independent effects of the idiosyncratic self-concept alone, one would also expect aspects of the self-concept that are closely related to group membership to be especially salient when a person is in that group's setting (Fine 2012; Turner et al. 1994), leading to an implicit group-level self-concept. Such a group self-concept includes shared conceptions of who group members are and what it means to be a group member. In this way group self-concept is closely tied to group styles (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Fine 2012) and can be seen in the shared emotional responses of a group (Effler 2010). Group self-concept thus includes what kinds of humor are considered appropriate or inappropriate in a given situation (Bender 2003; Fine and DeSoucey 2005).

In addition to aspects of self-concept that describe a group directly (e.g., our group is moral), many groups, especially minority groups, often define themselves to varying degrees through their negative reference groups; they define themselves by who they are not (Merton 1968). These perceived differences between the ingroup ("us") and the outgroup ("them") can easily become central to the group's identity (Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013; Lamont and Molnár 2002). The part of the group self-concept concerned with outsiders should be extremely important to group humorous styles for several reasons. On one hand, if outgroup members are of little significance to the identity of the ingroup, then it might be less likely for humor to focus on them. On the other hand, if outgroups are central to the ingroup's self-concept (i.e., they define themselves by who they are not), then the potential for outward-focused humor would be greater, if only because the outgroup is more likely to be thought of in the first place. But outgroup theory can also impact the choice of humor's targets and its severity (Davies 1990; Guenther, Radojcic, and Mulligan 2015; Kutz-Flamenbaum 2014). An admired outgroup, for

example, is less likely to be the target of biting or sarcastic humor, while an outgroup thought of as fools may attract a variety of jokes at its expense.

Thus, aspects of self-concept common to a group should open possibilities for certain kinds of humor while at the same time closing off other kinds. But the mere possibility, or even probability, of certain kinds of humor resulting from aspects of the self-concept and outgroup theory does not in itself ensure that such humor will occur, any more than the existence of any other piece of culture guarantees its use in a given situation (Swidler 2001). The final activation of such humorous genres takes place in micro-interactions through a combination of the specific setting, people present in the setting, and their interactional history with one another. Even in a group that has the possibility of biting outgroup humor, for example, where a foolish outgroup is central to the ingroup's self-concept, such biting humor need not be used all of the time. Certain settings (e.g., particular meetings or events) might be more conducive to this kind of humor. Importantly, specific individuals—especially those who tend to play the role of group jokester or clown (Goffman 1959)—may be more likely than others to activate a potentially humorous frame. The individuals may also be more likely to use more controversial humor if the group humor style allows them to channel their humor in that direction. Humor's use is always social (Davis 1993), and humorous ability is often a form of social capital within groups (Kuipers 2015). Thus, even within a group or organization with a humorous culture there could be pockets of humor, or constellations of individuals where certain aspects of the possible humor, such as offensive humor, are more likely to be used.

Empirical Cases

If the above arguments are plausible we would expect to see humorous styles vary according to group self-concept, even among otherwise structurally similar organizations. The examples below compare two groups comprised of religious minorities that use humor to generate solidarity, but do so in very different ways: Lake Church in Chicago, Illinois, and Prairie Atheists, an atheist organization in Oklahoma.[3] Members of both groups also frequently expressed a similar sense of embattlement within American culture (Smith 1998, 2013) and were extremely sensitive to outgroups.[4] Despite these similarities, the humor in these groups was expressed very differently. Prairie Atheists used sharp humor making fun of outsiders while Lake Church directed their much milder humor inward. After describing the data and methods, I will briefly examine the milder humor at Lake Church and then contrast it with the often biting humor found at Prairie Atheist events.

Data and Methods

This paper draws on twenty months of participant observation with Prairie Atheists, an atheist organization located in a metropolitan city in the Bible Belt, as well as three months of participant observation with Lake Church, an evangelical congregation in Chicago. These groups were selected as part of a larger ethnographic project exploring conceptions of religion among people with vastly different faith perspectives, and in environments with contrasting religious

[3] The names of all organizations and individuals are pseudonyms.
[4] Recent estimates of the proportion of evangelicals in the Chicago area range from 8 percent (Grammich et al. 2012) to 16 percent (Pew Research Center 2015) of the total population. While county and metropolitan level measures of atheist populations unfortunately do not exist, the best state level approximation estimates that roughly 4 percent of Oklahomans self-identify as atheists (Pew Research Center 2015), and there is no evidence to suggest that the proportion of atheists in the area studied varies dramatically from this assessment.

demographics. At both atheist and evangelical gatherings, I was able to easily establish good rapport with group members. As most Prairie Atheist events are quasi-public and primarily of a social nature, one is generally assumed to be a fellow atheist, unless proven otherwise, merely by virtue of attending an event. At Lake Church, my role was different, as it is common to be asked directly about one's relationship with Jesus Christ, and I do not share an evangelical's faith perspective. Instead, I was initially welcomed into church groups as a potential future member, although people soon relaxed around me and appeared to behave as if there were no outsider present.[5] At meetings of either group I would not automatically announce my status as a researcher but would instead disclose it as was conversationally appropriate. This usually happened upon meeting new people at the point in the conversation where we would ask each other what we each did for a living.

The resulting dataset for Prairie Atheists included notes from over 165 hours of in-person participant observation spread over ninety-five events, in addition to forty-eight online fieldnotes from the group's private online forum and twenty-one in-depth interviews. The online fieldnotes mirror traditional fieldnotes, but Prairie Atheists is not primarily an online community, and the bulk of data was gathered at in-person meetings. The dataset for Lake Church includes forty-two hours of in-person participant observation spread over nineteen events, supplemented by four in-depth interviews. Fieldnotes for both groups were written after events took place in order to avoid note taking in front of group members.

[5] It is common to have visitors in evangelical spaces (an example of which is described below), adding to the inherent ambiguities between insider and outsider status (Naples 1996). Nothing I observed indicated that people were significantly adjusting their humor styles because of my presence. I also did not notice any interactional markers indicating suppressed behaviors relating to humor (e.g., meaningful eye contact between insiders, suppressed laughter, apologies for inappropriate jokes, etc.).

The combined corpus of data was analyzed and coded inductively multiple times specifically for humorous events. An instance was marked as "humor" if it invoked a humorous reaction in those who were present or if it fit the general genre of a joke. Identifying an event as humorous during analysis is always, to a certain extent, a subjective undertaking, and this is especially true when dealing with sources like online interactions, which contain less context due to a lack of physical co-presence. In both in-person and online fieldnotes, I relied on my ethnographic knowledge of the groups and their culture to identify humorous remarks, as well as additional indicators present within interactions, such as audience reaction, facial expressions, tone of voice, etc. (Holmes 2000). Once all the humorous events were coded, I searched for patterns in the kinds of humor expressed. I then re-coded the instances of humor into multiple subtypes that represented the main kinds of humor in each group.

Lake Church

Lake Church is a white, evangelical, nondenominational congregation located in Chicago.[6] The church primarily attracts people in their twenties through forties and holds worship services in several different locations each Sunday in the areas where its congregants live. The population of worshipers at any particular location ranges from a few dozen to around

[6] Members of this congregation fit the most common theological and social science definitions of evangelicals (e.g., Balmer 1989; Bebbington 1989; Larsen 2007; Lindsay 2007). Lake Church is comprised of theologically conservative protestant Christians who emphasize the Bible, pursue an ongoing relationship with Jesus Christ, believe that salvation is attained only through Christ's sacrifice on the cross, attempt to convince others of their perspective, and have often had a personal conversion experience. Lake Church also has an extremely loose affiliation with a historically Baptist denomination that is a member of the National Association of Evangelicals, but the connection is not advertised and many members are unaware of it. For most practical purposes, the church is evangelical nondenominational. There is, of course, wide variation in belief, practice, and culture within the larger American evangelical community (Balmer 1989; Woodberry and Smith 1998), and that diversity is reflected in this study.

300 individuals. Over a period of three months, I attended worship services at two locations and participated in one of the congregation's small groups organized by an active member named Joel. An evangelical "small group" is group of people who meet regularly, usually in a members' home, to support one another along their faith journeys. Joel's small group met two or three times a month and normally had around eight to twelve people in attendance, most of whom were single individuals in their twenties and thirties employed in white collar careers. At any given meeting around 60 percent of the attendees were women. Group meetings were very informal and intertwined prayer and discussion of deeply personal faith issues with socializing and seasonal activities like pumpkin carving or Christmas cookie baking. Attendees enjoyed each other's company, often bringing along food or alcohol to share to create a pleasant atmosphere for fellowship and discussion.

Evangelical self-concept at Lake Church

"Evangelical" is a broad term that encompasses a wide range of Christian beliefs and practices. Although there naturally exists a degree of heterogeneity among the self-concepts of Lake Church members, three basic elements of the common group self-concept can be identified that are essential for understanding their use of humor. These three elements appeared to be uncontroversial and generally accepted by most members of the community.

1) Participants in the Lake Church small group understood themselves to be people who recognized and accepted the Truth of God's Kingdom. While not everyone phrased this idea in exactly the same way, people did, however, talk about recognizing a "Truth" in a way that aligned with key aspects of American evangelical identity. This included a certainty about a personal God working in the world; salvation available only through Christ's sacrifice on the

cross; a focus on the Bible as supreme authority; and an effort to convince others of their position (Bebbington 1989; Smith 1998). Lake Church members believed that they were able to perceive this truth, which in turn compelled them to act, including trying to spread their version of Christianity to outgroup members. One woman in her thirties explained, *"I think more what defines us as believers or Christians is this understanding of the Gospel and recognizing the bigger story. And I think that this gives us purpose, and a different kind of sense of purpose than a lot of other people might have."*

2) Small group members also saw themselves as broken sinners who were striving to follow Jesus to the best of their ability in a secular world. In other words, they viewed the evil and suffering in the world, as well as their own personal shortcomings and mistakes, as a result of God's divine order. In this way, they viewed themselves to be sinners just as much as, if not more than, non-Christians, and were because of this view predisposed to adopt positions of humility. As one person commented, *"I mean, hell, let's be honest, by and large, people that call themselves secular are probably better people than the average people who call themselves Christians."*

3) What then set the members of the group apart from outsiders, who were also sinful, was group members' recognition of the fact of their brokenness, their belief in Jesus, and their striving to follow God's word to the best of their ability. Some outsiders were therefore thought of as objects of sorrow, especially those who did not recognize their own sinful nature and/or who had not committed themselves to Jesus. A woman in her late twenties who worked in the Chicago music scene alongside predominantly secular individuals told the small group, *God has shown himself in my life so clearly. I feel bad for people I know, who haven't had those experiences, who struggle with their faith in a way that I never did.* The group also possessed the

embattled identity common to evangelicals and that positioned them in their own self-understanding as a besieged minority in American society (Smith 1998). For example, group members were conscious of their status as Christians working in secular jobs and were often able to list the few others at their workplace by name who shared their faith. This identity, however, was seldom expressed through hostility towards the secular world, but rather manifested itself as feelings of sadness and sorrow towards it. Outgroup members were not seen as opposites to Christians, but simply as people who, unfortunately, had not yet made the choice to follow Jesus Christ. Far from ridicule, non-Christians were more likely to be the object of thoughtful prayer.

Humor in Lake Church

Humor was used frequently within the group culture at Lake Church, both during church services and especially within the small group where I participated. When people joked, it was usually at their own expense, at the expense of the group as a whole, or lighthearted banter among friends. Jokes were seldom biting in nature, and jokes directed at outsiders' religious positions never took place during my time with the group. Most people participated in the humor, but people like Joel, the small group's organizer, had an outgoing personality that instantly transformed almost any setting to a potentially humorous one.

During worship services easy jokes and witticisms were commonly heard from the stage. One Sunday, for example, the man preaching that weekend talked about the theological concept of the hypostatic union during his sermon, using this specialized religious term verbatim. *I can't say what that word means,* he said, generating laughter in the audience, *but the point is that Jesus was fully human and fully divine.* Another Sunday a series of unusually strong thunderstorms threatened the Chicago area, resulting in the city's emergency sirens wailing while Brian, the

lead pastor of the church, preached his message. Upon noticing the sirens, Brian briefly paused and then asked, *Is that a tornado warning? At least we're in the right place.* The congregation laughed in response. Someone in the back of the room answered Brian's question with a joke of his own, *It's a flash flood warning. Just don't go downstairs,* the man quipped. *Satan at work,* Brian added, joking back. Such humor from the pulpit kept even complicated topics interesting and smoothed over possibly difficult situations that arose during worship services.

At other times jokes were used during potentially controversial messages from the pulpit, such as when the pastoral team led a sermon series on Christian spiritual gifts.[7] Brian started by acknowledging that there were a wide variety of beliefs and opinions on spiritual gifts within their church community. He mentioned that recent sermons had talked about other provocative topics like head coverings and sexuality. Now that they were moving to spiritual gifts, he said, the next thing that should be discussed was politics. This joke caused people throughout the worship center to break into laughter. Between various more serious points in his sermon the lighthearted banter surrounding spiritual gifts continued. *You might be like me, and maybe you saw Jesus Camp a few years ago,* he said, referring to the 2006 documentary film about a charismatic Christian summer camp for children. *It weirded me out; there's a lot going on there.* This statement again resulted in lots of hearty laughter from people in the audience. Later, towards the end of a list of spiritual gifts that Brain said he thought may appear in their community, he added, *healing—yeah, I went there.* This kind of humor from the pulpit highlighted shared culture (e.g., membership in the evangelical subculture), but also smoothed

[7] Spiritual gifts are miraculous abilities believed to be given to some Christians (e.g. healing, glossolalia, prophecy, leadership, etc.).

over differences between church attendees who held varying theological positions on potentially controversial topics.

Like humor that took place in the church building, much of the humor used in Joel's small group also focused specifically on the Christian beliefs and practices common to church members. For example, parallel to the sermon series on Sundays, the topic of spiritual gifts was also discussed in the small group. One evening in December, the group's members met at a pastor's home for a white elephant gift exchange. The exchange had multiple timed rounds and elaborate rules governing how gifts were won, in addition to many opportunities to steal gifts from other players. Before the exchange got underway there was a discussion about setting the time limits for each round. Peter, a man in his mid-twenties joked, *Use your spiritual powers!* Another time, when several small group members attended a Christian rock show together at a local bar, Monica, who was a regular group attendee, introduced the rest of us to a friend of hers who also happened to be at the show. Monica explained while making the introduction that she knew that her friend was special the first time that they met. *I said I love Jesus,* the friend quickly joked, and they both laughed in response. Humor highlighted beliefs and experiences that group members held in common, increasing their sense of community.

Other humor was focused more on the small group as a whole. Once everyone laughed together when it came to light that no one had done the suggested bible reading for the week, despite everyone's best intentions. Some group events were even planned with a humorous edge built in, such as when the announcement for the small group's Christmas party instructed people to wear ugly Christmas sweaters and declared that the group would be making ugly sweater shaped cookies. Sometimes group humor involved both the group as a whole as well as specific individuals at the same time, like when Joel talked about Allen, a very active former group

member who had moved away to the West Coast. Joel told those of us who did not know Allen personally that a key event in Allen's life was a trip to Colorado that he had made while he was still living in Chicago. After visiting Colorado, Allen came back to Chicago a changed person, one who was much more spiritual and who had been gifted with the ability to speak in and interpret tongues. After the story people laughed about the idea of going out to Colorado to *meet God* and Tara, a woman around thirty, then joked, *I guess we also have go to Colorado then*. Beyond its immediate comedic value, the comment resonated with the communal view that group members were broken sinners who were striving to follow Christ, even if that meant making significant life changes like moving to another far away state.

Other than a minor incident when a nonmember named Mario visited, there was little to no conflict or controversy over styles of humor during my time at the small group. Mario was a devout evangelical Christian who lived in the same neighborhood as Tara, one of the group regulars, but he was not a member of Lake Church. Tara had coincidently run into Mario earlier in the day and had invited him to the group's meeting, which was to be held in Tara's apartment later that evening. Before things got underway Mario, Joel, and I relaxed in the living room and waited for the others to arrive while Tara was in another part of the apartment. Around this time Mario asked me what I thought of Jesus. Assuming Mario shared the same humorous style as the small group's regulars I glibly replied, *He seems like a cool guy,* which immediately elicited a laugh from Joel, as I expected it would. Mario, however, was not amused, and explained to me how Jesus was more than just a "cool guy" and how calling him a cool guy was not a compliment. I quickly apologized and the conversation moved on. Although the exchange was not referred to again that evening, it illustrated some of the differences between this small group's culture and others found in Christianity. For Joel, the kind of joke I made was normal

and in line with the humor he laughed at regularly at the church. For Mario, however, Christianity was a serious subject where humor was out of place; one can only imagine how he would have reacted to Brian's joke from the pulpit about a flash flood warning making the church basement off limits being the work of Satan. Such interactions demonstrate the largely homogenous views on humor styles in the group as well as offering an example of a contrasting humor style from within the larger evangelical community.

Overall, humor in Lake Church primarily served to create social cohesion by facilitating bonding over shared beliefs, with the occasional uses of humor to smooth interaction (Fine and DeSoucey 2005). In either case the humor was directed inward, despite the importance of non-Christians (i.e., viewed as people who had not yet committed themselves to Christ) to the self-concept of group members. In all of the small group and church settings, making fun of outsiders would have felt out of place. Certain people in the small group, such as the organizer Joel, tended to be more humorous than others and played the role of jokester, but on the whole the humor was widespread throughout the small group and appeared compatible with members' self-concept. There was little to no conflict over humor in the group.

Prairie Atheists

Prairie Atheists is a loose organization of around 2,400 members that usually holds between fifteen and twenty meetings each month in locations scattered throughout its metropolitan area in Oklahoma. The ages of group members ranged from young adults to people in their sixties. Most were white, although there were occasionally African Americans and Latinos in attendance as well. The group was approximately 60 percent male. Most people at meetings grew up in the region; despite this fact, liberal social and political views were the norm.

Members' employment status varied from individuals holding professional and managerial positions to students and those working in relatively menial entry level jobs.

Prairie Atheists did not own or rent building space, and meetings were usually held in local restaurants and other social venues. Meetings were publicized on a commercial website that aims to connect people having similar interests with one another. A large amount of group activity also took place on a private internet page located on a social media website. Most nonvirtual meetings were informal and were centered on their status as social events, with the attendance at any particular event ranging from four to fifty people. Attendees mingled and chatted about whatever they felt like regardless of whether or not it was related to atheism, religion, or the group as a whole. For example, there were several Prairie Atheists standing lunch dates in different parts of the city. Once a month there was a larger dinner event at a pizzeria and the group also regularly fielded a team at a local bar trivia night. More formal events included special outings to museums and lectures, which were sometimes held in conjunction with other nearby secular groups.

Atheist self-concept in Prairie Atheists

Again, while specifics of the self-concept varied among individuals (c.f., LeDrew 2015), four basic elements of the group self-concept can be identified in Prairie Atheist members that are needed to understand their use of humor.

1) Prairie Atheist members commonly saw themselves as smart, logical, scientific, and rational (Baker and Smith 2015; Smith 2011; Williamson and Yancey 2013; Zuckerman 2012). As one man in his thirties phrased it, "*I'm not saying that all dumb people are religious, and I'm not saying all smart people are atheists, but I just see that in our group, I think if you were to*

take a per capita estimate of IQ levels or education levels, I think that we would have a much, much higher ratio compared to the average." A woman in her fifties expressed similar sentiments when I asked her about the difference between atheists and religious people. "*I think we use the brains God gave us*," she simply replied. This notion of intelligence was often expressed alongside related discourses that framed atheists as rational, logical, and scientific (c.f., Gouldner 1979).

2) Prairie Atheist members also often understood themselves to be highly moral individuals (Baker and Smith 2015; LeDrew 2015; Smith 2011). Perceived moral failings of religions were a common theme in the narratives told about becoming an atheist. A forty-year-old man explained how the perceived moral failings of Christianity pushed him into atheism. *"The final thing was reading through the Scripture start to finish. That's what I would say turned me into an atheist, because as I'm reading through the terrible stuff, I get to the point where I'm like, you know, God's frankly—he's an asshole."* The man went on to describe specific parts of the Old Testament he found morally troubling. Another group member in his forties explained during an interview, "*Honestly, I feel like I've got more morals than Christians do*." Later, when I asked him to describe atheists, the same man immediately replied, "*Educated, friendly, and moral*." Prairie Atheist group members often talked about the moral failings of religion, especially Christianity, and actively worked to present atheism as a moral undertaking through organized events like volunteering at a local food pantry.

3) Members of Prairie Atheists saw themselves as free and liberated and understood their atheism as one source of this freedom (Baker and Smith 2015; Zuckerman 2012). This could be seen in the prevalence of concepts related to atheism such as free inquiry or freethought (Cimino and Smith 2007). "Freedom" and its synonyms were also the second most mentioned item

describing atheism in an online free listing exercise completed by members of Prairie Atheists.[8] It was common to hear people express opinions congruent with notions of freedom like, *"I just feel like people should make their own decisions."* One woman felt that she was a failure because her son was a Republican yet justified her failure through her freethought ideology. *"I mean, you know, I believe in freethought; I believed in letting him make his own decisions."* Others talked about the ability atheists have to do what they want, and not to limit themselves to what a religion tells them to do, especially in regard to contested issues surrounding bodies and sexuality.

4) Implicitly included within the self-concept built around these other elements was that the religious majority in society possessed the opposite qualities; religious people were frequently seen to be irrational, immoral and prisoners of their belief (Sumerau and Cragun 2016). Not all atheists expressed these opinions, and some did to greater or lesser degrees, but these assumptions served as the foundation for much talk about religion at Prairie Atheist events. Religious people, for example, were often described as less rational than atheists because of their insistence that there is a god. "*Why do so many people believe?"* asked a man in his sixties named Chester rhetorically, before answering his own question. *"I think there are people who are essentially just not rational people."* Likewise, theism was frequently considered to be immoral, especially when it was seen to be oppressive of women and sexuality, or when it is forced on children who are seen as too young to make religious decisions themselves. Finally, theists were seen to be burdened by their belief in a way that made them unfree. Matt, one of the

[8] This online free listing task was based on a convenience sample (N=84) of people who visit the Prairie Atheists hidden social media page. In the task people were asked, "What words best describe x? Please list as many as you can," where "x" was "religion," "atheism," "spirituality," and "Christianity."

organization's leaders, succinctly summed up this view when he said, referring to religion, *It's about control.*

Humor in Prairie Atheists

Humor in the Prairie Atheists in some ways mimicked the humor in Lake Church in that a portion of it could be described as lighthearted banter. People joked around about the minutia of everyday life in a way that smoothed out the rough edges of social interaction and brought the group closer together. For example, when Matt complemented Chester on the tie he wore to lunch, Chester responded with a joking reference to the film The Godfather, *At work, they say it's my Vito Corelone look.* However, unlike the evangelicals who seldom, if ever, made fun of outgroup members, making fun of religion was an extremely common occurrence at Prairie Atheist events.

In humor directed at religion among these atheists, religion was usually found to be humorous in itself, especially when there were perceived logical fallacies involved, which were then interpreted as indications of religion's fundamental absurdity (Guenther et al. 2015). In these cases, no other joke was required; people understood that what was funny was simply the religious encounter and reacted accordingly. This encounter could be direct, in that atheists laughed at religion when exposed to it in person, or indirect, in that it was described by someone who experienced it firsthand. Thus "encountering the absurd" serves as a master category for understanding religious humor in Prairie Atheists; other types of humor dealing with religion were, to a large extent, simply variations on this theme (cf. Oring 2003). For example, people often parodied religions and religious practices, or pretended to be religious for humorous effect. In these cases, the religion "encountered" was not an actual example of sincere religious

behavior but rather a parody performed by one or more members of the Prairie Atheists. The "joke" sometimes also played on negative religious stereotypes and exaggerated the qualities being mimicked.

There were many instances of all of these variations of religious humor as encountering the absurd at Prairie Atheist events. For example, at lunch one day a woman named Donna talked to the group about her religious neighbor. *Did I tell you about my racist, redneck fundy neighbor?*[9] The question itself was enough to cause those attending the lunch to immediately break into laughter. The humorous aspect of Donna's question was multilayered. It combined the fact that the neighbor was religious with common stereotypes that one hears of theists in non-theist communities, namely that religion, unlike atheism, is linked with immorality (i.e., racism) and ignorance (i.e., being a redneck). On top of this, Donna's own strong and open atheistic stance heightened the humorous impact of her living next to a "fundy," and highlighted the humor for her target audience of the perceived absurd nature of the religion confronting them.

The same kind of seemingly spontaneous laughter could also result directly at the time of the original religious encounter. This took place when a number of Prairie Atheist regulars attended a talk at a local church entitled "Atheism's Attack on America." The church had brought in an outside speaker to give a weekend of lectures in support of various themes related to creationism. The humor first started online when someone posted a picture of a banner outside the church in the group's forum. The banner advertised the event with the text "Dinosaurs and Humans together?" Next to the text of the banner was a large drawing of a dinosaur skeleton. After a photo of the banner appeared on the Prairie Atheist online forum people began making fun of it almost immediately. "*Wasn't "The Flintstones" a documentary in cartoon form?"*

[9] "Fundy" is a pejorative term for a Christian fundamentalist.

someone posted. Around fifteen Prairie Atheist members decided to attend the first evening's public lecture at the church. Even though there had been discussions online ahead of the talk about remaining respectful while in attendance, portions of the speaker's presentation still caused giggles and outright laughter from the Prairie Atheist contingent despite all efforts to maintain proper decorum. Taken together, the joke was religion itself.

In line with atheist self-concept, religion was often seen as being inconsistent. It was common for someone to take a premise from their understanding of religious doctrine and follow it *ad absurdum*. The person making the joke would create an exaggerated parody of religion that was meant to follow the internal logic of the religious target. For example, a political discussion at lunch led to a further discussion of the practicalities of Jesus as a modern day political figure. It started when a man named Cameron said that we should actually follow through on his friend Mike's glib suggestion to write in Jesus on the ballot for president. Mike, however, raised practical objections. *But Jesus wasn't born in the U.S. I had to tell a little girl once that Jesus couldn't be President because he wasn't born in the U.S.* Cameron then began to think aloud about other possible problems if Jesus were to run for president. *To be president you have to be born, be born in the U.S. and be 35. If Jesus came back today he would be what, 32? 33? He'd have to wait at least a couple of years before he could become president.* Such exchanges reinforced group solidarity through participation in a shared discourse of rationality (Gouldner 1979) and by providing opportunities for micro-tests that showed whether or not one got the joke, and in turn whether or not one shared particular aspects of the group's self-concept (e.g., rationality) (Sacks et al. 1974).

Such mocking could be more biting than the examples above and sometimes included various sexual references and innuendos. At a bar trivia night, the Prairie Atheist group named

themselves “Chick-fellatio,” in reference to the perceived religious bigotry at play when the owners of the restaurant chain Chick-fil-A were seen by more politically liberal individuals to have supported various kinds of anti-LGBT activism. The name received hearty laughter when the trivia hosts announced it. Other examples of mocking religion through sexuality included explicit jokes, such as one I overheard at one of the monthly dinners held by the group: *Jesus loves you; Oh, shit, that was just one night in Cabo.*

Such humor, while common, was not a part of every outing. While there was usually at least some use of humor at most meetings, a few reoccurring events tended to be more humorous than others. Occasionally, I attended an event where there was practically no use of humor, despite the fact that attendees seemed to share the same basic atheist self-concept as those who went to funnier events. Like in Lake Church, certain combinations of people, especially when they were brought together, tended to incite more humorous situations. Personalities like Cameron, Mike, and Donna, among others, were usually willing to take on humorous roles, starting witty exchanges and then escalating them towards more biting and potentially offensive humor. Once someone activated a humorous frame, others would join in though laughter or by adding to the humorous dialogue.

This humor, once established, performed significant cultural work within the atheist community beyond simply reflecting the atheists’ self-concept. Humor was clearly an aid that helped create a sense of common solidarity (Fine and DeSoucey 2005; Meyer 2000), especially as a form of release from the conservative Christian culture that dominated the Bible Belt region where the group was based. The common bond formed through laughing together at the religious “other” helped a group of people come together who otherwise had little in common besides their lack of religious belief. This is a slightly different phenomenon than that described in other

theories of humor that imply that local "joking cultures" are based primarily on knowledge generated in local group dynamics (Fine and DeSoucey 2005). In the case of these atheists, the background information to understand the joke did not necessarily come from local group experiences directly, but rather from the larger genre of atheist discourse in the United States that frames religion as absurd. Even newcomers to the group could therefore immediately participate in the group's religious humor even if they had very little group-specific knowledge.

Controversies over self-concept and humor in Prairie Atheists

Like attendees at Lake Church, Prairie Atheists negotiated what it considered appropriate in variety of both formal and informal ways. When humor was found to be inappropriate, it was usually not because it made fun of religion per se, but because it was either deemed inappropriate for a particular forum, or because it challenged someone's interpretation of the group self-concept (i.e., atheists as rational, moral, and free). These situations were seldom, if ever, a problem when people met in person, but occasionally arose online.

For example, someone posted a sexually explicit meme online mocking religion and was asked to take it down by the site's official moderators. One of the reasons the moderators gave for their decision was that people may have accidentally ended up viewing the image simply by visiting the page and thereby had it on their screen when such a picture might create problems for them, for example at work or when children were present. There was an added issue that a small number of minors were also members of the Prairie Atheist online forum. Both sides of the issue, however, were upset by the incident, and it was one of the few online activities to spill over into the in-person meetings. At a lunch someone shared that the person who posted the meme was a friend who was quite upset over being asked to take the image down. Others were

apparently bothered that it was posted in the first place. Someone confided at the lunch, *People were saying that they were thinking of leaving the group over it. One woman posted, it's a good thing my kid wasn't walking by.*

A couple of months later another potentially offensive meme on the Prairie Atheist web forum, although primarily sexist and not having to do with religion, sparked the creation of a second, unofficial webpage for atheists in the state. Several people ended up leaving the Prairie Atheists over what they perceived to be continuing problems with over-authoritarian leadership that went against the self-concept of freedom, which many considered to be at the heart of their atheism. While the post itself was not removed, it started a heated and often emotional online discussion over what constituted proper decorum and why. One person who thought the meme went too far wrote,

> *Part of the problem is that this group is about being free from other people's opinions about how you ought to be. It's too easy to go from not attending church to not believing in god to being vocal about it to feeling like anything is fair game. And it is fair game. The thing is context, though. I love offensive jokes, they're great, but you can't go to Planned Parenthood and make jokes about rape. Similarly, the members of this group only have one thing in common, and maybe it's best not to belittle anybody about the other things.*

The author of this comment argued that the group should focus on the one thing that its members had in common, a shared rejection of any higher power. He also stressed the moral aspect of the atheist self-concept over the freedom aspect in implying that there are contexts where the feelings of others override being free to say whatever one wants. Others, however, viewed the criticism of the meme as bullying and censorship, despite the fact that some members might find the meme offensive. One member wrote: *"I'm not interested in having a group of … officials decide what I can or cannot handle, which would give way to changing every time we add/drop mods."* This person, in contrast, stressed the common attitude that atheists are and should be

independent thinkers that do not require anyone else, such as online moderators, to make decisions on their behalf.

After many heated back and forth arguments on multiple online threads, another parallel forum was created for those who preferred an anything-goes attitude in their online atheist home. The person who created the space announced it on the old Prairie Atheists forum.

> *I have created a new group for Atheists to vent in and discuss topics which may be offensive to some of the more "thin skinned" members of the Prairie Atheists…. We don't have a mission, like the wonderful communities do. This is simply a place for those who would like to be uncivil in impolite company to do so, with an atheist bent…. Group rules are simple … no getting offended. Complaining about content in the group will result in removal from the group to protect the peace and to preserve your sensibilities.*

Some members who were tired of their "thin-skinned" fellow atheists then quit the Prairie Atheists and began to exclusively hang out online in the new forum. Eventually, this spin-off group started having some in-person meetings as well. Months later, the wounds surrounding these humorous posts that "went too far" were still raw. The person who posted the explicit post mocking religion that I first described passionately explained to attendees at a regional freethought convention why the new forum was created.

> *We broke off from Prairie Atheists. They whine too much. They're too easily offended. They should grow some fucking balls. For example, I posted a picture once that created a whole problem with people reporting me to the moderators and all sorts of people got upset. So a bunch of us left and started a site with no mods, where anything goes. It's great.*

Thus humor and disagreements over it illuminate some of the rifts within the local atheist community over which aspects of their common self-concept should be emphasized and in what settings various aspects are relevant. Some members focused on the freedom associated with atheist identity, especially freedom to express themselves in all circumstances. Other people imagined a more managed and cohesive atheist community

that emphasizes particular set of morals that go along with organized non-belief. The kinds of humor acceptable to both subgroups varied accordingly.

Discussion

Because humor and the associated laughter help to shape social action in groups (Fine and DeSoucey 2005; Jefferson, Sacks, and Schegloff 1987; Kuipers 2008), it is important that we expand our knowledge of factors that may influence the forms that humor takes. This article makes four primary contributions towards this task. First, unlike existing psychological literature on humor styles, I propose the existence of group humor styles that vary in the targets of humor (inside/outside) and severity (harmless/biting). Second, data from this ethnographic study of atheists and evangelicals suggests that group humor styles are not random, but instead appear to be related to group self-concept, both how a group thinks of itself and of outsiders. Group self-concept creates possibilities for certain kinds of humor and closes off other humorous genres. Third, I point towards the possibility that even within groups that have fairly stable humor styles, concrete settings and/or individuals influence whether or not the humorous possibilities created by group humor styles are realized in practice. It appears common that certain individuals within a group tend to start humorous interactions—taking on a role as someone funny (i.e., group comedian or clown)—while others do not. Fourth, I demonstrate how investigating conflicts over humor can shed light on deeper conflicts over a group's self-concept and what it means to be a group member. Viewing humor in this way augments existing theoretical explanations for small group humor (e.g., Fine and DeSoucey 2005; Holmes and Marra 2002) as well as for the use of humor in social movements (e.g., Guenther et al. 2015; Kuipers 2008; Mulkay 1988; Owens et al. 2010).

For example, the self-concept of Lake Church members stressed their belief in a truth centered on the Gospel and their status as broken sinners striving to emulate Jesus. Outsiders who did not have the kind of personal relationship with Jesus that true Christians did were not the subject of ridicule but rather of sorrow. This tended to direct humor within the group, inward instead of outward, as well as kept the humor relatively mild in comparison to the edgy humor found among the atheists. Making fun of non-Christians would have been inappropriate because it would have conflicted with the group self-concept as broken sinners who are humbly striving to follow Jesus. The target of humor in Joel's small group was therefore often the beliefs and practices shared by the group's participants. While many people used humor, it was especially prevalent when certain "funny" people such as Joel played a humorous role. Conflict over humor was almost non-existent in the small group, except for an occasion when a nonmember was present who shared many of the group's beliefs but who was not integrated within its group culture. This general lack of conflict was congruent with the fairly homogenous self-concept expressed by the small group members.

Humor in Prairie Atheists, on the other hand, was very different. The Prairie Atheists' self-concept defined atheists as smart, logical, moral, and free, while at the same time defining theists as irrational, immoral, and enslaved by their religious beliefs. The idea that religious people are illogical, irrational, and possibly not as smart as atheists, was central to the atheists' humor dealing with religion. Religion and religious people were portrayed as fools—in other words, people who it is acceptable to laugh at—which when placed alongside the "rational" atheists, opened possibilities for potentially biting humor, especially as religion played a central role in the group's self-concept (Smith 2013). Religion then became funny on multiple levels consistent with both incongruity and superiority theories of humor. Religion was funny because

it did not match the “obvious” empirical reality lived by the atheists and laughter over this was one way that the atheists assert their superiority over theists.

Although the atheist self-concept created the possibility for such biting humor directed outward at their negative reference group, it also took specific persons and settings for it to be put into practice. Individual differences between aspects of the self-concept that were emphasized then resulted in different kinds of humor, which was sometimes offensive even to members of the ingroup. Those who stressed the freedom aspect of atheist self-concept were more likely to use potentially offensive humor than those who stressed the idea that atheists are moral. This resulted in certain events being funnier than others, as well as causing occasional conflict over potentially offensive humor on the group’s online forum.

Although humor was an important part of both groups’ cultures, humor appears to have played a larger role in the Prairie Atheists than it did at Lake Church. This may be a product of the atheist self-concept focused on rationality and the fact that incongruity is an important source of humor (Attardo 2008; Oring 2003). A belief in God, which was the defining aspect of religion for most of these atheists, is for them simply incompatible with such a perspective. Thus the juxtaposition of a theistic perspective, understood to be based on (nonscientific) biblical principles, with the “scientific” perspective of the atheists generated situations ripe for humor. This combination may help explain why humor is so prevalent in many other atheist settings beyond the ones described in this paper (e.g., Cimino and Smith 2007; Guenther 2014; Guenther et al. 2015; Heiner 1992).

Future research should attempt to verify and expand the ideas presented here concerning the relationship between humor styles and group-level self-concept. For example, while it appears that certain people tend to play the role of comedian, it would be helpful to further

explore the social dynamics that lead some people to take on that role over others. It would also be useful to examine the degree that self-concept and humor styles are related in different kinds of groups other than those involving religion. Furthermore, it should be possible to use the observations here to generate testable hypotheses concerning humor style based on a group's group self-concept.

CONCLUSION

Together, the preceding three empirical chapters offer a first exploration into practical definitions of religion. Chapters 2 and 3 examined practical definitions directly by using field experiments to try and see how atheists and evangelicals imagined religion and the field of religions in different circumstances. These chapters found that the category of religion is very contextual, unlike the fixed manner in which sociologists often approach it. Evangelicals from Maple Street Baptist Church, for example, often differentiated between religion and Christ-following, although it appears that it took some cognitive effort for them to do so. Both atheists and evangelicals also relied on political cues when mapping the field of religions, but mainly when they were categorizing their religious adversaries. Chapter 4, meanwhile, examined practical definitions more tangentially by looking at how imaginings of group-level self-concept and of significant outsiders worked together to create specific cultures of humor in atheist and evangelical groups.

More generally, this project is about much more than "religion;" it broadly addresses the sociological study of culture as well. The concept of practical definitions, for example, could be modified to apply to other fuzzy concepts, such as race, ethnicity, politics, gender, and sexuality. Examining how these other categories are shaped is just as important, each for its own reasons, as understanding the processes that are involved in the formation of the category of religion. But beyond the conceptual tools that this project engages, the methods used in this dissertation—and especially their active engagement with cognitive science—can be used more broadly within our discipline. Sociologists need to think more carefully about how we collect the data that tells us what we know, especially regarding cognitive context.

I hope that this project serves as an example of one way to integrate traditional ethnographic methods with other methodological tools informed more directly by "recent" cognitive science. Such integration, of course, will remain a challenge; as sociologists, we are not experimental psychologists, nor should we pretend to be. At the same time, however, it seems clear that there are several potential advantages to augmenting both traditional quantitative and qualitative sociological approaches with concepts from cognitive science. In many ways, the conceptual logic for doing so is the same as the logic behind any mixed methods project (see Small 2011). On one hand, these cognitively informed methods can be used to offer additional points for triangulation to help confirm data gathered using traditional methods. On the other hand, cognitive methods have an even greater potential to complement existing methods by providing perspectives that our traditional methods might miss altogether. As discussed at length in Chapter 1, there is ample reason to suspect that varying the methods of data collection to engage different cognitive processes increases the likelihood that we can capture a larger portion of the range of attitudes and behaviors that people exhibit in everyday life.

Yet another reason to deploy the kinds of field experiments developed in this project is that even if one does not use them for confirmation of findings obtained via other methods or for the purposes of cognitive complementarity, they still have the potential to highlight patterns in the social world that we might otherwise miss, even if those patterns could theoretically be discovered using traditional methods. That in itself is extremely useful, and it is especially promising if we then return to our traditional methods to confirm and interpret the experimental findings. In other words, field experiments like those found in this work, can direct us to areas that deserve further investigation. In Chapter 3, for example, the analysis of the card sorting field experiment indicated that something interesting is going on with how atheists and

evangelicals sorted Islam in relation to other religious groups. Both atheists and evangelicals tended to group Islam along with other non-Christian "world religions" when basing their sort only on religion, but then also separated Islam out from most other world religions politically. As mentioned in Chapter 3, these findings deserve further attention; they are not immediately interpretable within the confines of the field experiment or other data gathered up to this point within the larger project. While I cannot yet say with certainty what the groupings of these sorts mean, I can say that this is a finding that deserves further investigation, especially considering the importance of Islam to contemporary American and global politics. That Islam is imagined to be different politically than many other religions is perhaps not entirely surprising, and this fact may have eventually surfaced in other ways through interviews or participant observation. But in this case, it had not yet done so within this project. The field experiments thus opened a new avenue for investigation that may (or may not) prove fruitful in future research. This means that regardless of their other strengths, structured tasks like the field experiments have the potential to shake loose interesting avenues for further exploration that could otherwise be missed.

But this project also points to the overall importance of contextualizing cognitive field experiments from within traditional ethnography. Like the example of how respondents placed Islam in the card sorts illustrates, what we find in a field experiment may not be immediately interpretable without the additional context that thick description brings. Again, this is similar to the logic in many mixed method studies where, for example, in-depth interviews are used to interpret large-*n* survey data (Small 2011). But more fundamentally, a rich understanding of context as gathered through qualitative methods is necessary to even design meaningful field experiments. Had I simply created an entire project of field experiments based on current

knowledge of atheists and evangelicals as presented in the existing literature, I would have missed vital context and ended up with poorly designed tasks for respondents to complete. For example, it was only the ethnographic understanding of what the evangelical Christians in this project meant by "Christ-following" that allowed me to design a field experiment that helped make sense of these complex expressions of identity. Absent such ethnographic knowledge, the results of any field experiments exploring what these evangelicals thought of religion could easily have been misinterpreted.

Thus, in practice, the types of cognitively informed field experiments presented here blur the lines between different types of methods. Although for heuristic purposes in the introduction I wrote about the three methods used in this project (participant observation, interviews, field experiments) as if they were distinct from one another, that was never the case in practice. Ethnography and in-depth interviews informed the design and interpretation of the field experiments, and the field experiments informed continuing ethnography and in-depth interviews, as well as pointed towards additional areas for future research. The complete package of methods is far stronger than any one of these methods alone.

In addition to further discussing the methods of data collection in this project, it is also worth revisiting the conceptual framework of practical definitions of religion that was introduced in the first chapter. The stated purpose of the focus on practical definitions was to move away from etic conceptions of religion, necessary as they may be, and instead concentrate on emic understandings of religion that everyday actors create in practice. As summarized above, the three empirical chapters moved us closer to understanding some of these emic notions of religion in the United States, at least among two specific groups of people in two very different regions of the country. Now, however, it is time to turn that same analytical gaze inward and examine the

up-until-now largely unstated assumptions that accompany the way that the etic notion of "religion" is used analytically in this work. As a scholar, what do I mean when I use the word "religion?"

The way that I tried to approach religion in this project is as a system of mutable cultural concepts sharing a loosely defined set of family resemblances (cf. Murphy 2004). In this way religion is not much different than other concepts that we encounter everyday: e.g. race, gender, dissertations, automobiles, cats and so on. We see something (or otherwise interact with it) and place that thing within our understanding of the world. This process likely has something to do with prototypes and/or exemplars (see Murphy 2004 for a review of psychological theories of categories and concept formation). In practice, this means that things that share the traits of other things that we think of as religion get classified (or recognized) by us as religion (cf. Saler 1993; Wittgenstein 1953). If it looks like a duck and quacks like a duck, then we call it a duck. Or, as I quoted from Justice Stewart's legal opinion regarding obscenities in Chapter 1, "I know it when I see it." When dealing with waterfowl this process of recognition is difficult enough to analyze (e.g. when is a rubber ducky a duck?) and with something as ambiguous as religion it is more complex still. If I associate wings, bills, webbed feet and quacking with "ducks," what do I associate with "religion?"

I would argue that the analytical category of religion, as used in this project, has several traits. As I explain to my students in introductory sociology courses, I usually take the position that religion has something to do with beliefs, identities and practices, often those involving the divine.[1] I have, however, consciously steered clear of purely functional definitions that would

[1] Unpacking even this short statement would be a larger project than can fit within this Conclusion.

classify the atheists in this project, for example, as really religious after all.[2] This puts me firmly in the camp of those who give a narrower analytical definition to religion which implies more of a substantive essence to the category than simply functional equivalency. But I still hesitate to place much more of a firmer definition on religion. My position comes closer to that of Chidester (1996) when he wrote, "Religion is not the object of analysis; it is an occasion for analysis, an opening in a field of possible relations" (p. 259). Building on this idea, I argue that religion and its cognate categories (e.g. religious, spiritual, secular, etc.) being invoked, and/or things falling into a social actor's set of family resemblances making up such categories, are the signals to scholars of religion to investigate further. If people are calling something "religion," or something appears similar to what others call religion, as social scientists interested in religion we need to look at the situation closely. I stray from Chidester's claim, though, because I instead argue that we *should* treat religion as an "object" of analysis in that we can examine what emerges from the field of relations signaled by religion being invoked (or not invoked, in cases like the atheists). Such an object, of course, will be different for different people, as well as be different for the same people in different circumstances. It will also vary according to the positions of the perceivers and how they conceptualize the relations between all of the objects that are placed within the field of religions. Beginning to delineate these shifting contours of religion from the perspectives of various social actors was the explicit goal of this work.

While this conclusion may represent the end of the dissertation, the project upon which it was based is far from over. During fieldwork a small mountain of data was produced, including fieldnotes, interviews, and additional field experiments, only a small amount of which made it into the chapters of this document. The next steps to be taken with this material include bringing

[2] There is utility to such a project, but it is a very different project to the one pursued here.

together key aspects into a semi-cohesive narrative about the creation of the category religion in the United States. Such a narrative will begin by describing in more detail the day-to-day activities of the Prairie Atheists, both to give readers a better sense of how such a group operates as well as contribute to the growing scholarly literature examining atheist organizations and experience. Next, the question of how people at Prairie Atheists understand religion should be addressed using all the methods together that surfaced in the dissertation: ethnography, interviews, and field experiments. Following that, as a contrasting case, the "Christ-followers" at Maple Street Baptist will be presented. Again, focusing on Christ-followers has more than one purpose. Although scholars studying American religion are often aware that many white evangelical Christians differentiate between religion and Christianity, there is very little written on this interesting phenomenon.[3] In addition, it is important when studying American religion to examine how Christian groups create practical definitions of religion as Christianity is the largest religious identification in the United States. White evangelical Christians, in particular, hold a prominent position in the current American religious imaginary and are therefore appropriate for special focus.

Next the project will compare data from the atheist and evangelical communities in the Chicago region to look at these same issues from a different angle. The ambient religion of Chicago, which is very different than that of Oklahoma, offers a chance to consider the effect of place on religion. In Chicago, both atheists and evangelicals face different challenges than they do in the Bible Belt. Atheist groups in the metro area struggle to generate the same vibrant participation that is found with their peers in Oklahoma. Evangelicals in Chicago, meanwhile,

[3] Several scholars have assured me that antipathy towards "religion" among white evangelicals is well-documented common knowledge, but no one can point me to any academic discussion of it that is over a paragraph long. While such a discussion may exist, I have not been able to find it.

must deal with living day-to-day in spaces that are much more secular than the religiously saturated culture of the Bible Belt. In some ways, these groups' positions are almost reversed when comparing the two locations.

Finally, there are other stories to be told about the people included in this project beyond those directly addressing practical definitions. Both atheists and evangelicals often describe their respective positions as being evidence-based; what counts as valid evidence is what creates such a large discursive gap between them. Romantic relationships are another area for investigation, especially for active atheists, who often struggle to find a partner who shares their religious values.

As should be clear by now, the chapters in this dissertation are only the beginning of my thinking about issues related to religion, culture, and sociological methods. This study sets the foundation for continued exploration of the social category of "religion" and the cognitive processes that support our capacity to use abstractions like "religion" in everyday life.

APPENDIX A

Instructions, rating exercise (following a practice section)

On the next several pages, you will see the names of concepts and be asked to what extent certain words describe these concepts. Please answer each question quickly with your first impression.

You might think that some of the words describe the concepts very well, that some do not describe the concepts at all, and that others fall in-between these two extremes. There are no right or wrong answers. Simply answer with the choice that you feel comes closest to how you feel.

Remember, answer each question quickly and with your first impression.

Figure A.1. Screenshot, rating interface

Table A.1. Coding of positivity variables, sorted from most to least positive

	Atheists			Evangelicals	
	Word	Positivity Score		Word	Positivity Score
1	Skeptical	4.50	1	Faith	4.95
2	Disbelief	4.45	2	Jesus	4.95
3	Godless	4.40	3	God	4.9
4	Knowledge	4.15	4	Holy Spirit	4.9
5	Science	4.10	5	Love	4.9
6	Freedom	4.05	6	Forgiveness	4.85
7	Inner	2.60	7	Christ Followers	4.8
8	Love	2.55	8	Christian	4.8
9	Works	2.45	9	Close to God	4.7
10	Forgiveness	2.30	10	Heart	4.65
11	Emotion	2.20	11	Prayer	4.65
12	Heart	2.10	12	Higher Power	4.6
13	Intolerant	2.00	13	Free	4.55
14	New Age	1.85	14	Church	4.45
15	Practice	1.80	15	Inner	4.4
16	Ambiguous	1.75	16	Knowledge	4.1
17	Organized	1.70	17	Organized	3.85
18	Empty	1.50	18	Practice	3.55
19	Hypocrisy	1.40	19	Emotion	3.45
20	Rules	1.30	20	Rules	2.7
21	Control	1.25	21	Science	2.65
22	Faith	1.25	22	Works	2.55
23	Fear	1.25	23	Hypocrisy	2.55
24	Lost	1.25	24	Control	2.25
25	Antiquated	1.20	25	Intolerant	2.25
26	Brainwashing	1.20	26	Fear	2.15
27	Church	1.10	27	Money	2.15
28	Lies	1.10	28	Lost	2.05
29	Christian	1.05	29	Skeptical	1.8
30	False	1.05	30	Ambiguous	1.7
31	Higher Power	1.05	31	Disbelief	1.55
32	Jesus/Christ	1.05	32	Empty	1.45
33	Money	1.05	33	Lies	1.45
34	Prayer	1.05	34	Antiquated	1.4
35	Christ Followers	1.00	35	Godless	1.4
36	Close to God	1.00	36	New Age	1.4
37	God	1.00	37	Brainwashing	1.3
38	Holy Spirit	1.00	38	Silly	1.2
39	Silly	1.00	39	False	1.15

Table A.2. Atheists, OLS regression estimates of natural log of response time

	(1) RELIGION	(2) ATHEISM	(3) CHRISTIANITY	(4) SPIRITUALITY
Intercept	2.246*	0.60	1.875*	1.040*
	(0.114)	(0.087)	(0.133)	(0.093)
Applicability	-0.302*	0.378*	-0.277*	0.001
	(0.032)	(0.046)	(0.037)	(0.037)
Positivity	-0.209*	0.510*	-0.249*	0.047
	(0.040)	(.052)	(0.045)	(0.040)
Applicability x Positivity	0.082*	-0.154*	0.083*	-0.015
	(0.015)	(0.015)	(0.019)	(0.018)
R^2	0.141	0.138	0.084	0.005

Notes: The dependent variable in each model is specified under the model number.
Unstandardized coefficients. n = 780 for all models. Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.001 (two-tailed)

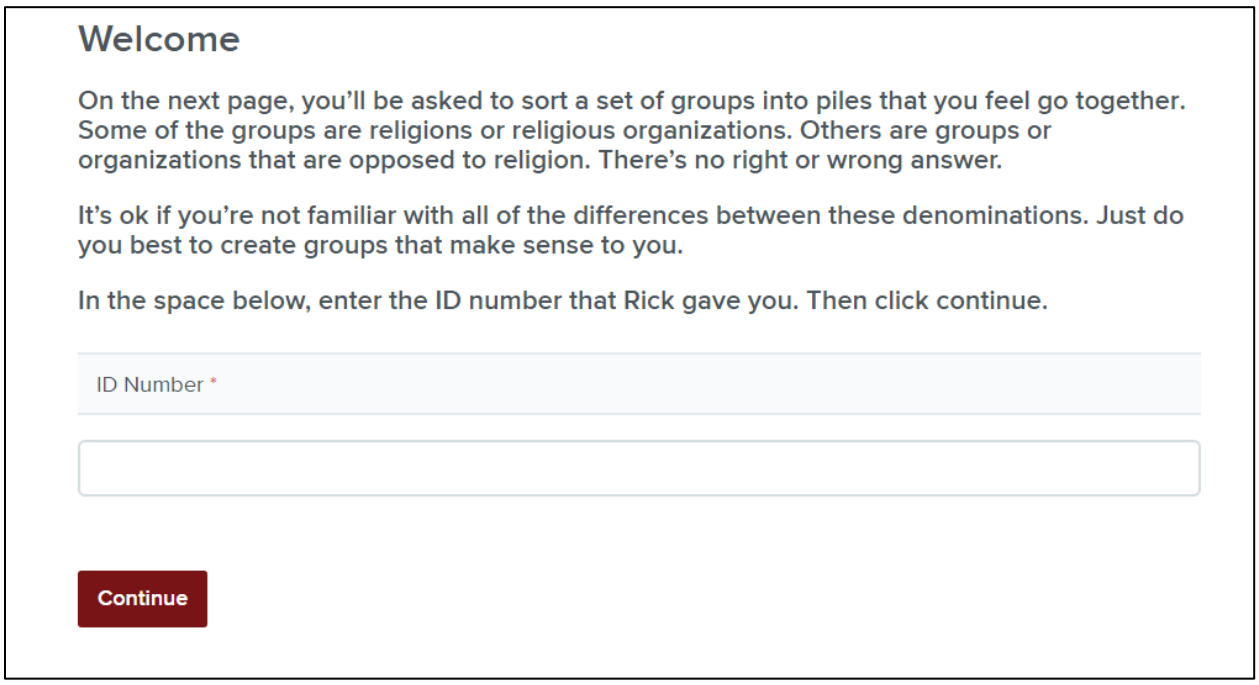
Table A.3. Evangelicals, OLS regression estimates of natural log of response time

	(1) RELIGION	(2) ATHEISM	(3) CHRISTIANITY	(4) SPIRITUALITY
Intercept	1.000*	1.976*	0.301†	0.587*
	(0.140)	(0.136)	(0.135)	(0.141)
Applicability	0.205*	-0.192*	0.241*	0.210*
	(0.050)	(0.040)	(0.051)	(0.054)
Positivity	0.265*	-0.226*	0.334*	0.282*
	(0.047)	(0.035)	(0.066)	(0.053)
Applicability x Positivity	-0.096*	0.063*	-0.100*	-0.091*
	(0.096)	(0.012)	(0.016)	(0.015)
R^2	0.110	0.055	0.065	0.70

Notes: The dependent variable in each model is specified under the model number.
Unstandardized coefficients. n = 780 for all models, except religion (n=778).
Standard errors in parentheses.
*p < 0.001 (two-tailed); †p < 0.05 (two-tailed)

APPENDIX B

Figure B.1. Screenshots of software interface



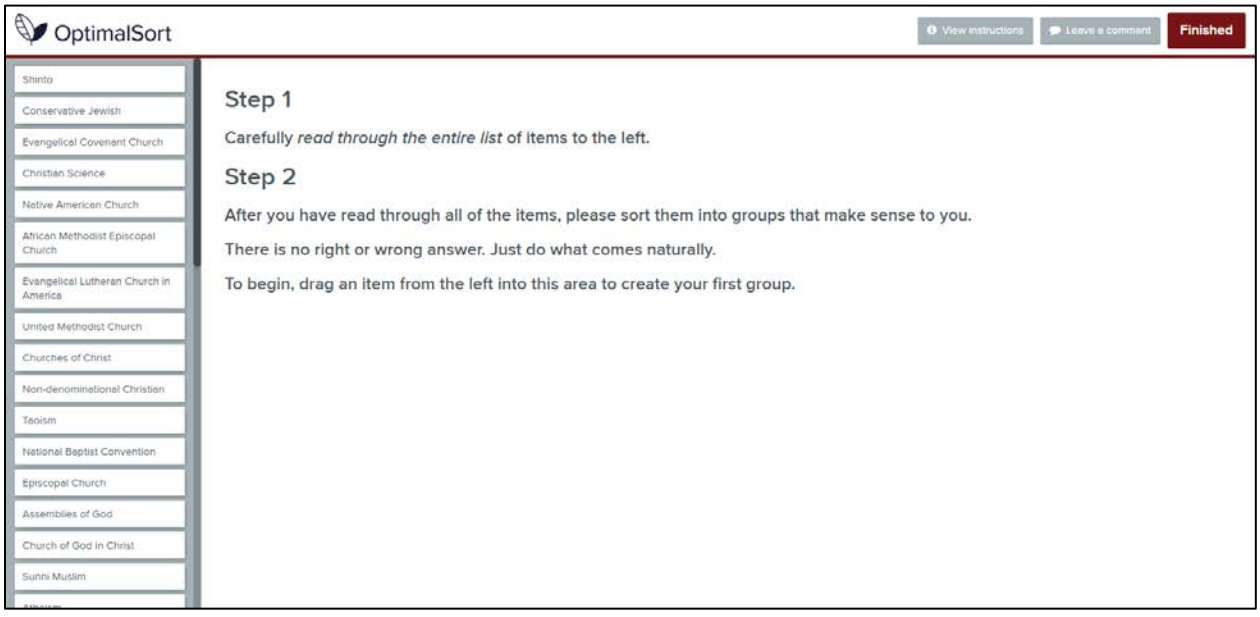
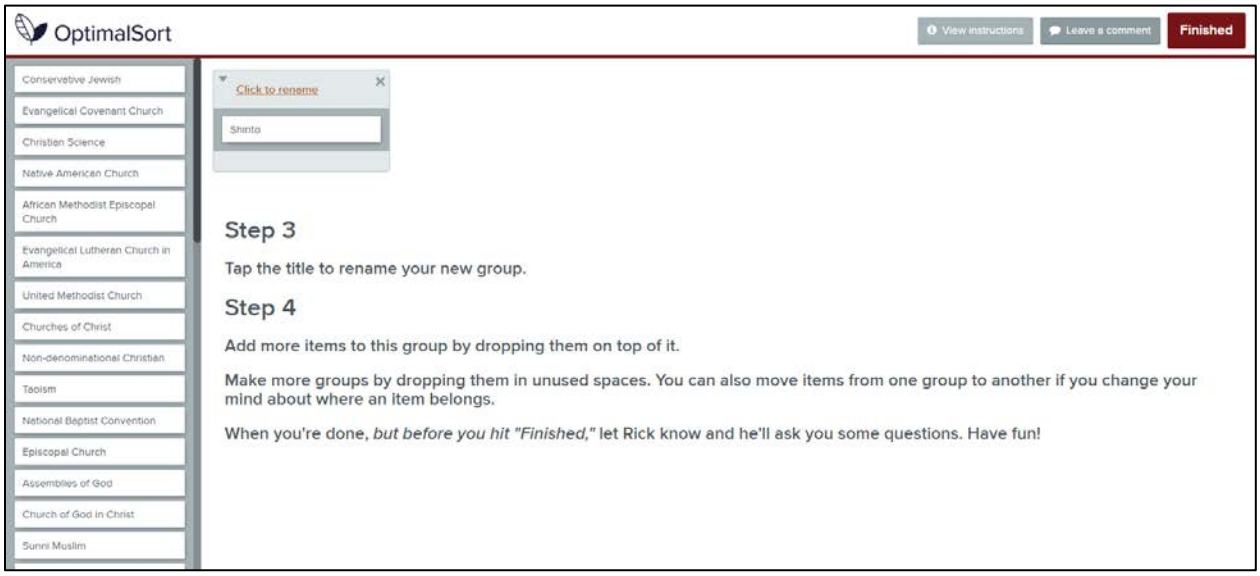
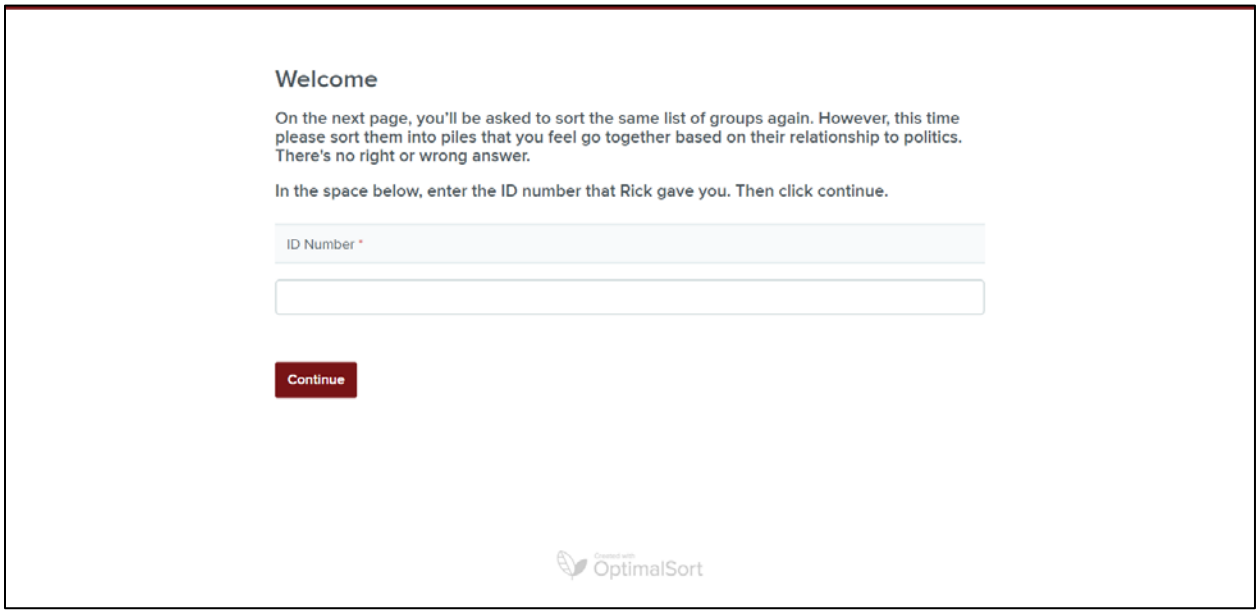


Figure B.1. Screenshots of software interface, continued





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