MCCLURE, AMY IRENE. Parenting from the Margins: Atheist and Pagan Parents in the U.S. Bible Belt South. (Under the direction of Michael L. Schwalbe).

This dissertation examines the parenting identities and practices of two marginalized groups in the U.S. Bible Belt South: atheists and Pagans. Based on participant-observation, in-depth interviews, and textual analysis, I show how atheist and Pagan parents responded to perceived threats to their identities as “good parents.” These responses took three forms: (1) managing spoiled moral identities through defensive othering; (2) socializing children to embrace worldviews and values consistent with parental beliefs; and (3) trying to eliminate or minimize unwanted religious intrusion by Christian family members. Parents engaged in defensive othering to distance themselves from discrediting stereotypes—specifically the “militant atheist” and the “hedonistic, flaky Pagan.” Atheist parents taught their children to think scientifically and critically, whereas Pagan parents emphasized an appreciation for magic and the importance of authentic spirituality. Atheists also steeped their children in competitive individualism, whereas Pagans encouraged creative individualism. Parents in both groups created physical and ideological barriers to shield their children from proselytizing by Christian family members. By comparing the middle- to upper-middle-class atheists to the poor and working-class Pagans, I show how parenting that challenges Christian hegemony is shaped by varying levels of economic and cultural capital.
Parenting from the Margins: Atheist and Pagan Parents in the U.S. Bible Belt South

by
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DEDICATION

For my steadfast partner in life. There is no recompense for the support you have provided. You didn’t just step back and allow me space to pursue my passions; you engaged with me every step of the way—emotionally, politically, and intellectually.

This dissertation is dedicated to you, Son Nguyen.
BIOGRAPHY

Amy Irene McClure was born in Ontario, Canada on June 21, 1975. At age seven, Amy’s family moved to South Florida where she graduated from Boca Raton Community High School. She went on to attend Florida Atlantic University, earning a B.A. in Sociology with a Certificate in Women’s Studies, while working various service, retail, and childcare jobs to support her college education. Seeking a compromise between humid Florida and freezing Canada, Amy earned her M.S. in Sociology in Raleigh at North Carolina State University. She continued on to enter the PhD program in Sociology at North Carolina State University. While finishing up her dissertation, Amy accepted a Visiting Assistant Professor position at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida.
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As a wise man once said, “We like to imagine ourselves to be self-reliant individuals, making our way through the world by the strength of talents that are ours alone. Being sociologically mindful, we can see that this notion is rather silly...we can no more get by without others than we can get by without air.” (Schwalbe 1998: 58-59) I hold no illusions regarding the support I have been fortunate enough to garner along the way. This dissertation is the culmination of the efforts of many, not one.

I would like to begin by thanking the wise man quoted above, my dissertation chair and mentor, Michael Schwalbe. I’m not sure you realized what you were taking on when you agreed to be my mentor but you stuck it out. I can only imagine the amount of time and energy expended to reign in my—let’s just call it “eclectic”—ways of thinking and writing. I have learned a lot along the way. Much of this is due to your tireless efforts to squeeze perfection out of this eager but sometimes unadapte sp schmolar. Thank you for taking me on. It has made all the difference in my life.

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as parents. You are amazing people and amazing parents. I hope this dissertation helps in some small way to allow others to see and hear you. I hope it contributes to a much larger, ongoing dialogue about your unique perspectives and struggles. Thank you.
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CHAPTER 1

STUDYING RELIGIOUSLY MARGINALIZED PARENTS

As a young girl I was a voracious reader. Some of the first stories I read were of a man swallowed by a whale, an ark loaded with animals battling a fierce flood, and water miraculously turned to wine. My children’s Bible was such a significant part of my childhood that I recently purchased a copy. I was curious to re-read the stories that so gripped the imagination of my childhood. I was a religious child. At ten years old, unbeknownst to my parents, I would sit alone in my bedroom reading my children’s Bible, praying to God, or reciting the corollary prayers associated with the rosary beads I held in my hands. I conducted myself in ways I hoped might please God.

Fast-forward to adulthood. Religion still fascinates me. It probably always will. From my Catholic roots to my current atheist identity, I have always felt passionate about understanding religious belief and its place in society. My apostasy has only strengthened my resolve to understand the nearly universal need to retain faith in deity. Upon entering graduate school I seriously considered specializing in sociology of religion but brushed it aside to focus on studying inequality and family. Though I was cognizant of a lingering interest in religion, I don’t think I realized the potency of this lingering interest until I was asked by my prospective dissertation chair to write up a handful of dissertation mini-proposals.

I knew I wanted to study something that I cared a great deal about but that I wasn’t so close to that I might become overly invested in the direction the analysis
might take. I typed up four proposals for projects devoted to examining inequality. Only after I prepared to discuss them with my dissertation chair was I struck by the common thread embedded in all four of my proposed research projects—religion. I proposed studying Catholic Worker houses, the XXXchurch.com’s approach to dialoguing about pornography with Christians, or the Ethical Culture Society (religious, philosophical organization). Finally, I proposed this dissertation project in its original form, an examination of parenting outside the religious mainstream—specifically, a study of atheist parenting.

My interest in atheism was spurred by five factors: (1) a flurry of provocative media coverage of the “New Atheism”; (2) an increase in the number of Americans identifying with no religion; (3) a recent sociological study on atheists’ marginalization; (4) a lack of sociological studies on secular families; and (5) my burgeoning atheism. Not all of these factors were evident to me at the time. Rather, through hindsight I have come to identify these factors as significant to my growing interest in studying atheism.

It seems that everywhere you looked in 2006 you could find provocative coverage of what the media dubbed the “New Atheism.” In November of 2006, Simon Hooper published a CNN article announcing “The Rise of the New Atheists.” However, it was in 2004, when Sam Harris published his best-seller *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, that a spate of best-selling books on atheism soon followed. Publications on atheism and humanism are not new. Indeed, there exists a canon of classical secular inquiry. Interest in humanism ebbs and flows. The
contemporary mainstream popularity of the New Atheists has sparked a new dialogue on secularism.

New Atheism generally refers to the published works of Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and (the late) Christopher Hitchens. New Atheism is the name given to the ideas promoted by those who have advocated the view that "religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises" (Hooper 2006). The unapologetic, scientific case for atheism (and against religious belief) has hit a nerve in American culture, spurring some to reexamine their beliefs, provoking a backlash from others. The current popular culture and news media is saturated with discourse on atheism.

The second factor that drew me to studying atheists was a desire to understand shifting demographics in the United States. According to the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life (2012):

In the last five years alone, the [religiously] unaffiliated have increased from just over 15% to just under 20% of all U.S. adults. Their ranks now include more than 13 million self-described atheists and agnostics (nearly 6% of the U.S. public), as well as nearly 33 million people who say they have no particular religious affiliation (14%)

This is a significant shift. It is also broadly misunderstood. The understanding by many is that "unaffiliated," or "nones" as they are often referred to by religion researchers, are self-identified atheists.

This assumption of unaffiliated as atheists was proudly touted as scientific fact by some atheists I studied. At the first atheist meeting I attended, this “14%” was lauded
as an indicator of the large percentage of people in the U.S. who identified as atheists.

However, a new survey by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life (2012), conducted jointly with the PBS television program Religion & Ethics NewsWeekly, clarifies the scope of the unaffiliated ranks:

Many of the country’s 46 million unaffiliated adults are religious or spiritual in some way. Two-thirds of them say they believe in God (68%). More than half say they often feel a deep connection with nature and the earth (58%), while more than a third classify themselves as “spiritual” but not “religious” (37%), and one-in-five (21%) say they pray every day. In addition, most religiously unaffiliated Americans think that churches and other religious institutions benefit society by strengthening community bonds and aiding the poor.

Regardless of whether the unaffiliated are, in fact, atheists, there is no denying that the relationship Americans have had with institutionalized religions is changing.

This dissertation project was also catalyzed by the study “Atheists as Other: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” published by Edgell et al. in *American Sociological Review* (2006). I read this article as I was choosing a dissertation topic. The prejudice against atheists the authors’ document struck a nerve in me, both professionally and personally. In this article the authors demonstrate that despite the declining salience of divisions among religious groups in the United States (increasing acceptance of pluralism), the boundary between believers and nonbelievers in America remains strong.

Using new data, the authors show that atheists are less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than almost any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and
other minority groups, including Muslims, recent immigrants, and homosexuals. Americans name atheists as those least likely to share their vision of American society. The authors show that not only are atheists less accepted than most other marginalized groups, but that attitudes towards them have not exhibited the marked increase in acceptance that has characterized views of other racial and religious minorities over the past 40 years.

The fourth factor that prompted me to study atheist parenting involved the reaction I had to digesting the research described above through an inequality/family sociological lens. Though I have read numerous studies of minority families, some being religious minorities, I could not think of a single study of atheist parents. I felt this gap needed to be filled, especially given popular media attention to atheism.

Finally, as briefly mentioned above, I have recently come to self-identify as atheist. Though my curiosity about atheism and a desire to learn more about a group of people I identify with was a strong factor pulling me towards the undertaking of this project, it was merely one of many factors. I would be lying if I said I did not look forward to engaging in dialogue with other atheists. Perhaps concerns about how my intimate connection to atheism might shape my analysis in unconscious ways also cemented my desire to include another group of parents in this project—a group I had no previous connection to—Pagans.

The inclusion of Pagan parents in this project came after the decision to study atheist parents and at the insistence of my dissertation chair. I was reluctant to expand
the already daunting project before me. In retrospect, I can see how the addition of Pagan parents strengthened this project. Though the groups differ in significant ways—mainly social class, cultural standing, and, of course, religious beliefs—they both share common parenting rights and responsibilities and do so while occupying a marginalized space in the culture, particularly in the Bible Belt. By including a second marginalized group of parents, I was able to move beyond an analysis of how atheism shapes parenting to an analysis of how inequality shapes parenting.

There is not much research on perceptions of Pagans in our culture, but what exists strongly points to a continuing marginalization of Pagans in the United States, despite an increasing interest in Wicca and New Age spiritualities (York 2003). Barker and Oldridge (2003) found that Pagans overwhelmingly felt themselves to be negatively perceived by others. They reported that outsiders viewed Pagans in one of two ways: as “Satanist and evil” or as “flaky hippies,” both constructs consisting of negative imagery. The authors found that interviewees constructed themselves as “outside” mainstream culture.

DEFINING ATHEISM AND PAGANISM

Atheism can be defined as either the affirmation of the nonexistence of gods, or the rejection of theism. More broadly it is understood as an absence of belief in deities. Atheists struggle with the discourse and naming of their (non)belief. Some strongly affirm the nonexistence of any supernatural deities, while others just believe that there
is as of yet no empirical evidence supporting the existence of deities and therefore (for now) they choose to disbelieve in gods. For this study, I included anyone voicing an absence of belief in deities to be atheist. Some identity markers respondents used in lieu of atheist included: secular, secular humanist, humanist, skeptic, freethinker, agnostic, and Unitarian Universalist.

Definitions of Paganism vary, but the most generally agreed upon definition is any organized faith outside Abrahamic, monotheistic faith groups such as Christianity, Judaism, or Islam that holds an earth-based set of beliefs. I use the language of “Pagan” and “Paganism” because these are the terms used by the people I studied. Technically, however, “neo-Pagan” and “neo-Paganism” are the more accurate terms for the modern movements of polytheistic, often “environmentally-based” religions that share a desire by members to revive or reconstruct historic spiritual traditions.

In the U.S., Paganism generally refers to polytheistic religions. It is most commonly associated with Wicca. Paganism is sometimes considered to include Indian religions such as Hinduism or Buddhism, as well as Chinese folk religions, Shinto, African Tribal religions, Shamanism, American Indian spirituality, and Druidism. For purposes of this study, I defined anyone with religious belief outside of monotheism who self-identified as Pagan or Wiccan as Pagan.

The term “Pagan” from its Latin origin can be translated into English as “country-dweller.” Through Western connotation it is usually associated with earth-based “folk” religions (this vague definition is controversial but popularly held) and
connotes an attentiveness-to and attunement-with one’s natural environment.

Westerners tend to imbue the term Paganism with negative connotations. “Pagan” has historically been used as a pejorative to describe non-Christians.

Neo-Paganism was spurred by a witchcraft revival in Great Britain in the 1950s (Kelly 1991; Russell 1980), making its way to the United States in the 1960s. Witchcraft revivalists (Pagans) in England and the United States borrowed from various folklores and legends, especially the “romantic image of a prehistoric matriarchal culture and its goddess religion” (Jorgensen and Russell 1999). The Pagan movement in the United States was also shaped by the growing influence of feminism and radical critiques of mainstream religions as patriarchal (Goldenberg 1979; Christ 1982).

In terms of ideology, though, there is a tremendous amount of diversity. Pagans tend to be highly inclusive and culturally relativistic (Jorgensen 1996). Most Pagans believe that it is up to the individual to define and pursue his or her own spiritual path, hence there is little recruiting and no proselytizing. Pagans honor female deities but usually not to the exclusion of male deities.

SETTING AND METHOD

The data from this study derive from multiple methods, including participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and text analysis. I conducted participant observations with four local groups, two atheist and two Pagan. I also attended five (semi)annual workshops/festivals. These gatherings differed in purpose and structure.
Participant Observation

Participant observation is a way to gain intimate familiarity with a group of people and their practices through involvement with them in their natural environment, over an extended period of time (Spradley 1980). Participant observation is not just about taking notice of what people do. It is about integrating oneself into the world of those being studied, in order to begin to understand their world through their own eyes (Dewalt and Dewalt 2002). So I set out to understand atheists and Pagans through their eyes.

When I first thought to study parenting by groups outside the religious mainstream, I attempted to gain access to local groups through a popular online social networking website. I searched this site for atheist parents and found that no group existed anywhere in the country (at least through this website). I then searched for atheist groups and found a local group that was open for anyone to join. There was no fee; all I needed to do to become a member was to click on a “join” button. So I did.

I then sent an email to the organizer of the local atheist meetup group. I shared with the organizer my personal interest in and identification with atheism, as well as my academic and scholarly interest. I let him know that I was interested in doing research on some aspect of atheism. He wrote me back that night and welcomed me to the group.

I acted as a full member and attended local meetings (about once per month). The group boasted over 200 members, but meetings usually drew 15-40 people.
Meetings sometimes involved the showing of a video (e.g., an atheist debating a Christian) with informal socializing afterwards. Group members also organized social outings to see films or eat at a restaurant, have a picnic, or attend a “game night” at a member’s house.

At meetings I made small talk, engaged in philosophical and political debate, and socialized with atheists. Conversations were sometimes formal, involving the entire group. Other times conversations were informal, revolving around small groups of people. I participated in both types of conversations. I took fieldnotes after each of the meetings I attended. I also spoke informally with other members, recruiting some for later interviews. I attended a total of eight meetings before shifting my observations to the newly formed secular parenting group.

A member of the atheist group started an atheist parenting group a few months after I joined. This member decided, admittedly in part because of conversations we had on the topic of atheist parenting, to organize a group for atheist parents. This group formed in late July of 2007. The organizer created the group through the same social networking website as the larger atheist group. The description for the parenting group stated:

This group provides encouragement to parents and children who are naturalists, freethinkers, atheists, secularists, agnostics, secular humanists, and perhaps pantheists and generally spiritual people who submit to no dogma and who are comfortable around people who do not believe in afterlife.
A local newspaper ran a story on the group in May 2009 (the story was picked up by papers throughout the country). The story prompted over 250 online comments from local readers and drew 30 new people to the group.

This group grew to over 90 members in the first 20 months. Its website currently lists 234 members. The initial plan was for members to meet every 3-4 weeks as a large gathering. Smaller playgroup meetings were later added to the schedule. Playgroups met at parks, children’s gyms, or skating rinks to give the children a chance to play while the adults socialized. The desire for greater intimacy in friendship and for children of same-age groups to play together sparked this change. Eventually, group leaders also added book discussion meetings for adults only. As I left the field more adult socialization meetings were being added to the schedule as well. As more members joined the group, more types of meetings were added to the schedule.

I attended fourteen large monthly meetings, taking extensive fieldnotes after each meeting. The larger monthly meetings lacked a formal structure, but parents usually discussed parenting practices, as well as the unique struggles they faced as secular parents. I also observed nine playgroup meetings and two book discussion meetings.

At the same time that I joined the local atheist group (May of 2007), I also searched on the same social networking website for Pagan parenting groups. I found one, but it was not open to the public. I submitted an online request to join the group, along with a detailed explanation of my scholarly interests and an assurance of
confidentiality. I was, however, unable to obtain access to the group due to “the need to protect of the privacy of Pagan mothers.” Fortunately, there were groups for Pagans of all kinds, including but not targeted towards parents. I emailed the organizer of one group, explaining my scholarly interest. She emailed me back welcoming me to the group. I attended seven meetings with this Pagan group, one every 6-8 weeks.

This Pagan group was much less organized than the atheist groups, and meetings were prone to cancellation. Sometimes meetings consisted of just two members and the organizer. The largest meeting I attended had seven members present. Though this group was not specifically designed for parents, I was fortunate to meet a few Pagan parents through this group and to observe parent-child interactions at meetings. This group focused on matters of Pagan theology, such as the proper role of ritual, the moral code embedded in the “Wiccan Rede,” the use of powers gained through personal trauma, and techniques for grounding and shielding while working magic. On one occasion, the organizer held a meeting on the topic of Pagan parenting, specifically to assist me in my research. I recorded my observations as fieldnotes.

In June of 2007 I joined another Pagan group found through the same website. This group was open to the public. Meetings were held every 4-8 weeks at a local bookstore coffee shop, with a range of 4-9 members in attendance at any given meeting. I attended three meetings before it disbanded approximately six months after I joined. This group was a social group. Many members had been friends for years and interacted outside the group. Conversations sometimes revolved around topics related
to Paganism, while other times conversations were far more mundane, regarding work problems or relationship gossip.

**Interviews**

In addition to participant observation, I conducted 40 in-depth, open-ended interviews. I interviewed 20 atheist parents and 20 Pagan parents. I used snowball sampling to expand my interview pool beyond my original network of parents accessed through group meetings. Interviews usually took place in coffee shops or in parents’ homes. Because Pagan parents were harder to identify and recruit for interviews, I conducted 4 interviews with Pagan parents over the telephone. All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim.

I conducted interviews using a loosely-structured interview guide. After conducting a handful of interviews, the guide was refined to include questions that prompted especially informative responses (e.g., How would you respond if a family insisted on taking your child to church?). Other interview questions explored the process by which a parent came to identify as atheist/Pagan, parenting problems associated with atheism/Paganism, most important lessons parents can teach a child, how morality is transmitted from parent to child, and how parents coped with discrimination.
Additional Data Sources

Dale McGowan, author of *Parenting Beyond Belief*, a secular parenting book, taught a local workshop in March 2008. I attended the workshop, took fieldnotes, and gathered printed materials given to participants. I used these materials for textual analysis.

In July of 2007 in conducting initial research on secular parenting, I discovered an organization that offered summer camps for the children of atheists or humanists. I found the website for Camp Quest, started in 1996 by Edward Kagin, a man upset by the Boy Scouts of America’s refusal to allow (children of) atheists to join their organization. Camp Quest is a national organization that at the time of my initial research sponsored 5-6 annual camps throughout the United States (it now offers 16 annual camps at locations in the U.S., Canada, and the United Kingdom). The purpose of Camp Quest, according to its website, is to:

> Provide children of freethinking parents a residential summer camp dedicated to improving the human condition through rational inquiry, critical and creative thinking, scientific method, self-respect, ethics, competency, democracy, free speech, and the separation of religion and government guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States. (www.camp-quest.org)

Camp Quest is supported by contributions from humanist organizations and by tuition fees. I contacted camp organizers directly and they allowed me to observe at a summer camp (in Minnesota) and to take fieldnotes on the experience. The organization gave me permission to use its real name.
For five days in August of 2007 I participated in camp activities such as henna painting, working at a homeless shelter, and conducting science experiments. In my fieldnotes, I wrote about the types of messages that were being created and maintained through the camp structure. I photographed activities as well as signs posted and artwork made by campers. I spoke with camp administration, camp counselors, and some of the children’s parents on Parent Night. I recorded these conversations in fieldnotes. I found this opportunity to be helpful in shaping later interview questions.

In October of 2007 and again in September of 2008 I attended Pagan Pride Festivals. I participated in a ritual to bless the festival. I observed crafts being sold and services being offered (e.g., small business assistance) to Pagans. At both festivals I attended seminars for Pagan parents. In these seminars parents discussed the emotional, financial, and legal struggles they faced in raising their children. I took fieldnotes and networked with seminar leaders. I recruited some interview participants from these seminars.

I also attended two annual Pagan gatherings in 2008 and 2009 run by two separate Pagan organizations. Both gatherings were touted by organizers as “family friendly” and offered children’s programs. I received permission from the directors of each gathering to observe the children’s programs and take fieldnotes. I also attended two Sunday services at a local Unitarian Universalist (UU) congregation. Both atheists and Pagans referenced the UU church as a place welcoming to themselves and their children. I pursued questions about the UU in future interviews.
Finally, I read, coded, and analyzed archival data. Specifically, I drew data from online group message boards. I also drew upon various news articles published on secular parenting, conducting content analysis of stories and of readers’ comments. Archival analysis was often prompted by parents in the groups I studied. When parents expressed interest in a specific topic or publication through message boards, I used the data from those threads to contextualize both my participant observation work as well as interviews.

Analysis

Data were analyzed using the constant comparative method, or grounded theory, as laid out by Glaser and Strauss (1967). This analysis was developed semi-inductively. As Kathy Charmaz (2006) explains:

Grounded theorists collect data to develop theoretical analyses from the beginning of a project. We try to learn what occurs in the research settings we join and what our research participants’ lives are like. We study how they explain their statements and actions, and ask what analytic sense we can make of them.

This qualitative method required the use of data to develop analytic categories rather than the testing of hypotheses based on pre-existing theory.

In line with this methodological approach, I recorded fieldnotes. I line-coded¹ fieldnotes and interview transcripts to identify basic themes in the data. Through this

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¹ “Coding means that we attach labels to segments of data that depict what each segment is about. Coding distills data, sorts them, and gives us a handle for making comparisons with other segments of data.” (Charmaz, 2006)
initial coding I sought to identify problems experienced by atheist and Pagan parents, as well as the strategies used to deal with those problems. Initial coding also helped me identify where data was lacking and sent me back into the field or to interviewees to ask follow-up questions. The process, though systematic, was more organic than linear.

I used strategies of focused coding, writing analytic memos and integrating memos to flesh out the analytic story bit by bit. Preliminary analytic memos were written about codes, including comparisons between groups or codes (Charmaz 2006). Through the process of observing, writing fieldnotes, initial coding, and focused coding, I worked toward identifying patterns in the data. Each round of coding pushed me to a higher level of abstraction, as per Charmaz:

Thus, we build levels of abstraction directly from the data and, subsequently, gather additional data to check and refine our emerging analytic categories. Our work culminates in a ‘grounded theory,’ or an abstract theoretical understanding of the studied experience. (Charmaz 2006)

By following this method, I was able to see how the parents I studied made sense of their lives, how context shaped their identities as parents, and how they developed strategies to cope with the problems that stemmed from their marginal status in a Christian society.

ATHEISM IN THE UNITED STATES

Atheism is on the rise in the United States. Survey research allows insight into the rise of the religiously unaffiliated, as well as atheists. According to the latest Pew
Center on Religion & Public Life survey (2012), there are now 13 million self-described agnostics and atheists in the United States. That is approximately 6% of the population. Another 33 million Americans claim no religious affiliation. Not surprisingly, the bulk of unaffiliated Americans are under the age of 30. It remains to be determined whether this generation of atheists and unaffiliated will remain so. What we can see is that both rejection of affiliation with religion and willingness to self-identify as agnostic or atheist are on the rise.

Sociological inquiry into atheism, so far, is meager but growing. Philosophers have delved into the subject of atheism but sociologists have been slow to do so. Sociologists of religion have devoted attention to the task of critiquing religion. Yet, they have devoted less energy on examining atheism. In one recent exception, Penny Edgell et al. (2006) examined social perceptions of atheists collected through a national survey. The authors found that respondents see atheists as the least trustworthy minority in the country, out of a list of minorities that included gay men and women, Muslims, and recent immigrants. Respondents also chose atheists as the minority group that was least likely to share in their vision of America. They reported overwhelmingly that they did not want their own children to marry atheists. The authors argue the significance of these findings becomes apparent when we recognize these beliefs exist within the context of the simultaneous trend in American culture towards increasing religious pluralism. While Americans are apparently primed for reporting tolerant attitudes towards some minorities, they do not extend this tolerance to non-believers.
This research clearly documents the marginalization of atheists within American culture. While survey responses about tolerance towards other minorities does not necessarily translate into tolerant actions by those same respondents, we can infer that tolerant behavior is less likely to occur when tolerant ideologies are absent.

Bridget Ann Fitzgerald (2003) conducted qualitative research for her dissertation on the construction and negotiation of nonnormative identity of atheists living in the United States. Through interviews she explored the development of atheism for these individuals and discovered specific trajectory paths that influence the length of the process of “coming into their atheism.” She also found that atheists feel stigmatized, face negative consequences because of their atheism, and use various stigma management strategies. Therefore, the marginalization of atheists has been documented through both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Baker and Smith (2009) analyzed the “nones,” or individuals who report no religious affiliation on national surveys. They distinguished patterns of spirituality, political ideologies, and opinions on separation of church and state of “nones” by separating them into three groups: atheist, agnostic, and unchurched believers. Their findings were relatively predictable, with atheists espousing lower religiosity than the other two groups, all three groups espousing similar political views, and equal aversion to religion in the public sphere reported by all. The significance of their research has less to do with these findings and more to do with a desire to understand the contours of the unaffiliated. As discussed above, some Americans assume all religiously
unaffiliated are atheist, and this is simply not the case (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2012).

Jesse M. Smith (2013) conducted research on the organization “American Atheists.” He explored how atheists come together to collectively manage stigma. He cites the influence of the Internet in bringing together marginalized individuals. What Smith’s study adds is an understanding of how a collective organization such as American Atheists facilitates social activism in broader atheist movements. Unfortunately, this research, like almost all the new research on atheism, overlooks parenthood entirely.

One exception stands out. Ecklund and Lee (2011) examined how nonreligious scientists at elite universities negotiated religion in parenting. Using secondary data, the authors examined how and why parents with no belief in a deity raise their children in religion. They found that parents believed religious institutions could provide children with a sense of community and tradition. Some believed religious communities were effective in providing a moral foundation for children. Though atheist and agnostic scientist parents raised their children in religion, they avoided fundamentalist religious institutions with strict adherence to dogma. In doing so, scientist parents believed they upheld their values in imparting to children choice in future religious belief.

Ecklund and Lee’s study is the only other study I am aware of that examines secular parenting. However, it focuses on a small niche within an already small
community—that of atheist and agnostic scientists at elite universities choosing to raise their children in religion. What this study demonstrates is the appeal of conventional religion in rearing children. If any group of parents could feel comfortable raising their children outside of religion, these parents, whose colleagues overwhelming also identified as agnostic or atheist, would have. Yet even these parents chose a conventional path in childrearing.

There exists some sociological literature on secularism in general. In the edited volume *The Sacred in a Secular Age* (Hammond 1985), various sociologists discuss secularism indirectly via their own research on religious cults (Beckford 1975; Bainbridge 1984; Bromley and Melton 2002), evangelicals (Hunter 1983), the Moonies (Barker 1984), new African religious communities (Jules-Rosette 1979), Pentecostal Catholics (McGuire 1982), and spirituality in baby boomers (Roof 2001). The authors do not address atheism specifically, merely the (presumably) secular culture at large.

The authors of these essays assume that mainstream American culture is secular, not religious. As the volume editor points out, “Certainly, the authors of the essays of this volume assume that we live in a secular age…” (Hammond [ed.] 1985). Yet, since the mid-1980s when this volume was published, social scientists have documented a rise in evangelical religiosity in this country, as well as an increase in disassociation with organized religion and an increase in New Age spiritualities (Roof 2001). The assumption of American secularism made by many sociologists may be in
need of updating. The trend toward religious polarity in this country makes this a propitious time for studying atheists and Pagans.

Certainly, the assumption that the United States is secular is contrary to the beliefs of those I studied. Many of the atheists and Pagans in my study believed that Christianity is the hegemonic backdrop against which they raise their children. This belief was especially strong among those who had moved from other areas of the country into the Bible Belt. Though elements of American culture reflect secularist principles, this does not negate the heavy influence of Judeo-Christian ideology on the culture at large. Nor has every part of the country experienced secularization trends in the same way.

The Bible Belt South, where this study takes place, refers to a handful of states in the southeastern United States\(^2\) in which evangelical Protestants make up a significantly larger portion of the population than in other areas of the country. According to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2009), the percent of Americans who identify as evangelical Protestant is 26%. In the Bible Belt states, evangelical Protestants constitute between 31%-51%\(^3\) of citizens, well above the national average. The result is a regional culture in which religion, politics, and civic life are heavily influenced by conservative evangelical Protestant values.

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\(^2\) The Bible Belt South generally includes Florida, Alabama, Tennessee, Kentucky, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

\(^3\) Florida constitutes the only Bible Belt state with a lower percentage of evangelical Protestants than the nation, at 25%
The atheists and Pagans I studied felt most threatened by evangelical
Protestants. The Bible Belt has also been associated with the culture of evangelism,
religiosity, and church attendance. By reviewing some of the associations with
evangelical Protestantism in the U.S. we can get a clearer picture of the kind of
religiosity that dominates the Bible Belt.

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2008) reports that 56% of
Americans deem religion to be very important to their life. This percentage jumps to
79% when describing evangelical Protestants specifically. On average, 71% of
Americans claim they are absolutely certain that God exists. This percentage jumps to
90% when describing the beliefs of evangelical Protestants. While 33% of Americans
believe in a literal interpretation of scripture, 59% of evangelical Protestants claim
literal interpretation. In terms of practice, 54% of Americans claim to attend a religious
service at least once a month, while 72% of evangelical Protestants claim the same
(with 39% of all Americans attending at least once a week compared to 58% of
evangelical Protestants). Political ideology also splits along religious lines, with 37% of
Americans claiming a conservative political identity, while 53% of evangelicals identify
as politically conservative. Taken together and with an understanding of evangelical
Protestantism as concentrated heavily in the U.S. South, it becomes easy to see why
those who claim an alternate identity, such as atheist or Pagan, view their environment
as hegemonically Christian.
PAGANISM IN THE UNITED STATES

More studies have been done of Paganism than of atheism. Margot Adler (1997), a journalist and Pagan herself, documented the secrecy of Pagans, who often keep their beliefs entirely or selectively to themselves for fear of being misunderstood or discriminated against. Other researchers have documented Pagans’ accounts of anti-Pagan discrimination and violence (Melton and Poggi 1992; Scarboro, Campbell, and Stave 1994).

Jorgensen and Russell (1999) collected information on the social identities and demographics of American neo-Pagans, documenting ethnicity (overwhelming white ethnics of European descent), socioeconomic status (mainly working class to lower middle class), and routes into Paganism (nearly all from mainstream Judeo-Christian religions, and in equal proportion to the general religious demographics of the country). Other social scientists have examined the routes by which American neo-Pagans come to their beliefs (Melton and Poggi 1992), corroborating Jorgensen and Russell, though showing a slight overrepresentation of people from Jewish backgrounds.

and Ezzy (2009) examined how popular media images of witches influence young Pagans’ perceptions and entry into Paganism.

While all of these studies helped to ground my research, not one study has focused on Pagans’ experiences as parents. What the authors above have added to the sociological literature is an understanding, albeit a limited understanding, of what it is like to be atheist or Pagan in the United States. What this study adds is an understanding of how religious minorities’ lives are shaped as parents. Much research tells us that the experiences of parents and non-parents tend to differ in important ways, even when they overlap in other regards. It seems, then, that we are overdue for an examination of how religious marginality matters for parenting, and of how parenting alters the experience of religious marginality.

RELIGION AND PARENTING

Most of the parents I studied, like many Americans, had left the religion in which they were raised. The young adult years are often marked by a significant decline in religiosity (Willits and Crider 1989; Uecker et al. 2007), even as many young Americans retain a sense of “spirituality without religion” (Wuthnow 1998). This pattern holds true for individuals raised in all major religions (Albrecht, Cornwall and Cunningham 1988; Hoge 1981; Hoge, Johnson and Luidens 1993). However, this pattern is reversed when young adults segue into parenthood. Family formation increases religious participation (Stolzenberg, Blair-Loy and Waite 1995).
Becoming a parent increases the likelihood that adults will seek out organized religion or return to a previously embraced religion (MacMillan and Copher 2005; Elder et al. 2003). Sherkat (2008) attributes this at least partially to “strong desires for the health, safety, and well-being of progeny.” He argues that parents return to religion as a coping mechanism, providing an outlet for fears about the unknown future of their children. Even when parents hold doubts about religion, the belief in God helps to assure them that their children’s futures fall in line with a larger plan. Other researchers argue that parents boost religiosity as they seek help in providing children with “a core set of values to live by” (Ingersoll-Dayton, Krause, and Morgan 2002:64). Regardless of motivation, the pattern is one that has been heavily documented.

The literature on religion and parenting is vast. Heavily dominated by quantitative research and a focus on Christianity, researchers have studied links between religiosity and parenting styles (Alwin 1986), the benefits of raising children within mainstream religion (Bartkowski et al. 2008; Mahoney 2007), and how parental religiosity affects children’s psychological and academic well-being (Brody et al. 1996). In reviewing much of this literature, I surmise that sociologists, like most Americans, reinforce the hegemonic expectation that parents will (and should) raise their children within conventional religion. Much of the literature implicitly treats the religious socialization of children—as long as it not taken to an extreme—as positive.

The atheist parents I studied bucked the trend of (re)joining religion once they became parents. Yet they did so in the face of pressure to conform to the norm of
raising children within conventional religion. Parents are expected to teach their children morality and values through the aid of religious institutions. Even the Pagan parents I studied, who were affiliated with religion, were castigated for their choice to expose children to the “wrong” religion. This study contributes a different perspective on the role of religion and parenting, one that places the voice of the marginalized front and center.

DISSERTATION OVERVIEW

This study examines how religious minority parents cope as parents in an environment they perceive as hostile. This is a study of identity work of minority parents as well as a study of how minority parents parent. This project attempts to explore the ways in which identity and parenting behaviors are inextricably intertwined. The following chapters reflect this complex reality.

Chapter 2 focuses on the ways that becoming a parent created or exacerbated a moral crisis for both atheist and Pagan parents. As parents, they were supposed to imbue their children with moral values. Yet they could not draw on conventional religion to do this, and in fact their religious marginality undermined their moral authority as parents, at least in the culture at large. I show how both groups dealt with this problem by practicing a form of defensive othering in which they accepted certain stereotypes, mainly atheists as militant and Pagans as hedonistic and flaky, and then defined themselves in opposition to these negative images.
Chapter 2 also shows how the mainly upper-middle-class atheists and the working-class Pagans drew upon different resources, including human and cultural capital, to shape identities that upheld their legitimacy as good parents. Ultimately, atheist and Pagan parents’ differing social statuses significantly influenced their reliance on defensive othering as a strategy for dealing with inequality. While atheists used defensive othering as one way to establish their worthiness as parents, they did so with a wealth of other legitimating resources. Pagan parents, on the other hand, lacking other valued resources, depended primarily on defensive othering to establish their worthiness. Though both groups engage in defensive othering, the stakes differed for the two groups of parents, with atheists fighting for respect from others and Pagans oftentimes fighting to retain custody of their children.

Chapter 3 examines how atheist and Pagan parents used their belief systems and other resources to influence their children’s definition of reality as well as their moral character. Atheist parents attempted to pass on their version of reality based primarily on science, logic, and nature. Pagan parents sought to transmit an enchanted, magical sense of reality to their children. In shaping children’s sense of reality in these directions, parents inevitably shaped their morality in particular ways as well. Atheist parents tended to impart a strong sense of competitive individualism to their kids. Pagan parents, in comparison, emphasized a morality based on creative individualism. Ultimately, this chapter compares and contrasts social class expectations regarding parenting styles and values, finding Pagan parents bucked the trend of emphasizing
obedience to authority and conformity in children, choosing instead to foster creativity and authentic spirituality.

Chapter 4 looks at how atheist and Pagan parents dealt with proselytizing Christian family members. The majority of atheists and Pagans, who believed their children were endangered by their family’s attempts at proselytizing, attempted to create and maintain boundaries between their kids and their Christian family by minimizing contact. When this didn’t work, they tried to create ideological boundaries, allowing Christian family to share their religion with kids as long as they didn’t talk about sin and damnation. This chapter also examines the emotion management strategies used by parents who were unable to completely insulate their children from unwanted proselytizing.

Chapter 5, the concluding chapter, discusses the implications of the major findings from this study. It includes discussion of how findings from analytic chapters contribute to larger bodies of literature on identity work, social class and parenting values, and intrusion on parenting from the privileged. I engage with the various literatures to analyze how minorities negotiate parenting against the backdrop of Christian hegemony. This chapter ends with an assessment of the unique strengths and weaknesses of this project as well as suggestions for future research.
The atheist and Pagan parents I studied felt stigmatized both before and after they became parents. However, in becoming parents atheists and Pagans faced a moral crisis brought on by what they perceived to be intensified social disapproval. A return to mainstream religion would have been one solution to the crisis. But having gone through the long process of claiming the deviant identity of “atheist” or “Pagan,” a (re)turn to mainstream religion was not a viable option. Instead, atheists and Pagans used a strategy of defensive othering to maintain their highly valued identities while rejecting perceived accusations of being “bad parents.”

Defensive othering is a form of reactionary identity work through which minority group members deflect stigma while also minimizing conflict with a dominant group (Schwalbe et. al 2000). This form of identity work involves accepting the dominant group’s stereotyping and stigmatizing, but only as applied to other members of the minority group. To engage in defensive othering is to say, in effect, “Yes, those stereotypes accurately depict other members of my group, but not me.” Using this strategy can help some stigmatized individuals gain patronage from the majority (Schwalbe et. al 2000), or deflect hostility, but it leaves stereotypes unchallenged.
Defensive othering has been observed among homeless men (Snow and Anderson 2001), women who justify their exploitation of other women in the pornography industry (Paul 2005), and women athletes trying to deflect homophobic stigma (Ezzell 2009). Sociologists have documented defensive othering behaviors in such diverse circumstances because defensive othering seemingly allows stigmatized individuals a way out of an impossible situation: having to choose between bearing the costs of discrimination imposed by the majority, or undertaking the daunting and often alienating work of social justice activism. It is no wonder that some seek a third option. However, their actions, understandable as they may be, tend to undercut broader social justice movements. While some minority members turn to collective activism to fight discrimination, they find their actions undermined at every turn by the enemy within—members of their group who participate in justifying and reinforcing the prejudice and discrimination they seek to end. As I will demonstrate throughout the chapters to follow, becoming a parent appears to push religious minorities away from social activism and towards what they perceive to be safer ground.

PARENTING AND DEFENSIVE OTHERING

Because parenting is culturally defined as revealing a great deal about moral character, dominant group members have often politicized the parenting behaviors of minority group members. Sociologists have documented how gay and lesbian (Stacey 1998), Black (Feagin 2005), and low-income (Hays 2004) parents have faced such
politization of their parenting. Atheist and Pagan parents, though not historically oppressed, nonetheless felt similarly spotlighted and indicted by the dominant religious majority.

Many of the parents in this study, particularly atheists, were transplants to the Bible Belt South. They expressed shock at the local and sudden relevance of their orientation toward religion. As Rachel (atheist) put it:

I just moved here from [a large northern city]. No one ever asked about religion there. I mean there were surely religious people, but it was just not talked about. Religion's supposed to be private, right? Now all of a sudden everyone I meet asks me what church I go to. It's been a shock.

Defensive othering was prompted for some by a sudden shift of religion from the private realm to the public. Having moved to the Bible Belt, atheists and Pagans were asked to do something new: account for their personal beliefs as they related to their value as parents. In searching for an account, they sought to avoid the stigma from the most threatening stereotypes.

Atheist parents felt most threatened by the stereotype of the angry, militantly anti-religious atheist. For Pagan parents, the most threatening stereotypes were of being hedonistic and “flaky.” Defensive othering—admitting that these stereotypes accurately applied to other atheists or Pagans, but not them—was a way to defend against stigma and perceived moral indictment, while avoiding more direct conflicts over religious beliefs or parenting methods. Below I examine how atheists and Pagans
did this, using defensive othering strategies that reflected their differing levels of social resources.

CREATING THE COEXISTOR ATHEIST

Atheist parents managed stigma by distancing themselves from the stereotype they found most threatening as parents: the militant atheist. Instead, they embraced what I refer to as a “coexistor atheist” identity. Though a couple atheist parents embraced the militant stereotype as empowering, the majority of parents took issue with it. They sought to project a nonthreatening image by distancing themselves from anything militant.

They used four distancing strategies. First, they avoided the label of atheist entirely, defining it as inherently militant. Second, faced with unapologetic atheists, coexistor atheists used subtle boundary work to disassociate themselves from them. Third, atheist parents defined secularism as moderate. Finally, some atheist parents sought a secular spirituality, creating common ground with conventionally religious others. In relying on these strategies, atheist parents engaged in defensive othering by legitimating the militant atheist stereotype as real and problematic.

People often accuse atheists of being hostile toward religion (Dawkins 2008; Hitchens 2009; McGowan 2007). Some see atheism as a form of fundamentalist religion whose followers fanatically worship science (Martin 2002). In these views, there is no such thing as a moderate, friendly, atheist next door. Atheists themselves are aware of
these stereotypes and are not unaffected by them. Many come to internalize these accusations and respond by othering other atheists.

Unlike many childless atheists, coexistor atheists see religion as an inevitable byproduct of human nature and/or the nature of civilization. Like the people who display the “Coexist” bumper sticker on their cars, many atheist parents present themselves not as anti-religion but as wanting no less respect than the religious are afforded. However, in doing so they unintentionally reproduce the stigma they are attempting to avoid by defining “militant atheists” as real and as problematic.

Avoiding the Label

Many coexistor atheists shunned the identity of atheist, as they associated atheists with being anti-religion or hostile toward religious people. Regina, mother of a two-month-old daughter and a three-year-old son, described why she eschews an atheist identity:

I do not go by [the term] atheist because I don’t consider myself an atheist at all. I just say that I am not religious if anybody asks. I would say I’m closer to agnostic than atheist. But I definitely don’t participate in any organized religion at all. [Question: Do you hold any beliefs of God or religions?] As far as the beliefs, not really. Some of the morals and values, certainly. [I share] some of them. But no, I don’t have belief in God at all. But people would label me as an atheist just by saying that, but I don’t consider myself atheist. I’m not militant about it.

Regina admits most people would call her an atheist based on her beliefs. Yet she does not see herself as atheist, since she sees atheists as necessarily militant, and she abhors
militancy. Instead, she self-identifies as agnostic or non-religious—identifiers that lack the threatening associations of atheism. If atheists are by definition militant, then agnostics and non-believers can claim the opposite. These identifiers allow coexistor parents to hold secular worldviews while avoiding the penalties reserved for atheists who challenge Christian hegemony.

The idea of atheism as necessarily militant or radical came up in numerous interviews. Megan, mother of a two-year-old son, kept the atheist identity at arm’s length: “I shy away from calling myself atheist because of the association. I’m not a – I’m a pretty passive atheist as far as what’s out there. I didn’t even bother to define myself before I had kids.” Though she doesn’t finish the sentence, “I’m not a …,” she follows it immediately with “I’m a pretty passive atheist as far as what’s out there.” What’s out there is a stereotype of atheist as militant, a stereotype she prefers to deflect.

Allison, agnostic mother of a four-year-old daughter, constructed and distanced herself from the identity “angry atheist.”

[My husband and I] are pretty much on the same page now because he doesn’t consider himself atheist either. He went through a period of time where he did consider himself atheist. Back then he had that enlightening moment where he realized, oh my gosh, this [religious belief] really is a bunch of crap. I think he went through that period where he was angry atheist guy. But now he just doesn’t believe in religion and doesn’t really know for sure. You know, he thinks there might be reincarnation and that energy continues somewhere.

[Question: Do you think the [atheist parenting] group is a place where you can discuss those things?] I don’t think so. It wouldn’t be discussed there. But that’s the thing.
are the kinds of things that won’t be talked about at all. It’s sort of like OK, I want to talk about something else now but they, I mean, a lot of the angry atheists, because they were raised in that, we will talk about it and talk about it and talk about and talk about it. And nothing else.

Allison was a central member of the parenting group. She actively participated in and helped organize functions. Yet in characterizing other atheist parents (including her husband in the past as “angry atheist guy”) as angry and obsessed, she reinforced the stereotype that hurts atheist parents.

Other parents denounced the representatives of what the media dubbed “New Atheism” (Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris). Coexistor atheist parents generally denied a need for atheist activism—something the “New Atheists” stand for in their unapologetic approach. Coexistor atheists were acutely aware that media coverage of the New Atheists had provoked a backlash. Accusations of atheists as militant were rampant in news reader feedback, which parenting group members often shared on message boards. For example, in the online feedback to a local news story on the secular parenting group, comments quickly turned to accusations of secular parents’ extremism, even as the journalist described the local parenting group in moderate terms as a support group looking for community in raising children outside of religion. As one reader commented:

I am an atheist... but few things disgust me more than evangelical atheists. You basically take a believer, subtract anything positive that comes with belief, and then the only things left over are the obnoxious parts. These people are believing in and selling a religion. It is just a "naughty" one, so they can pretend to be non-conformists and authentic and free-thinking, while at the same time reaching out to
shove their religion down everyone else's throats as maliciously as any [Girolamo] Savonarola. Anyone who has been paying the least bit of attention knows popular culture in the US is purely atheist. Believers are the counterculture...

Defensive othering is pronounced in this reader’s feedback. The reader, supposedly atheist, takes the parents to task for an alleged radical, evangelical agenda. The reader expresses disgust for the group in the process defining him/herself as a better kind of atheist, one free from a radical agenda. Given the article author’s moderate, nonthreatening portrayal of the atheist parenting group, this type of reaction (representative of about half of all posted comments) suggests the strength of the stigma associated with militant atheists, explaining why atheist parents felt the need to distance themselves from atheism.

Anonymous online comments tend to be more hostile than face-to-face interactions. Yet the atheist parents I studied were entirely familiar with these reactions. I coded five articles on atheism or secular parenting in archival data analysis. All included substantial levels of feedback from readers accusing atheists of radicalism and an anti-Christian agenda, no matter the content of the article. These articles generally made the rounds on the atheist parenting message boards. Atheist parents were affected by the barrage of negativity directed at their alleged militancy.

**Boundary Work within the Atheist Parenting Group**

Atheists without children were far more likely than atheist parents to embrace a militant atheist identity or to dismiss the “militant atheist” stereotype as humorous and
of little consequence. In atheist parenting meetings, parents who presented themselves as militant were loud but not dominant. Their comments evoked lackluster responses from other atheist parents, as recorded in my fieldnotes:

Everyone goes around in a circle introducing themselves. When it gets to the last father’s turn he announces with gusto and anger, “I’m Ben. I’m here because I can’t stand the stupid fundie bullshit here in the Bible Belt. It’s everywhere and it’s absurd!” A couple parents nod in approval but most seem uncomfortable. Jen and her husband immediately leave to tend to their child. A few parents shift their weight nervously or half-smile. Most parents pretty quickly break up into small discussion groups. No one responds to Ben.

I observed this type of response on more than one occasion. Though there were only a few parents who could have been called militant, there was little uptake when they expressed anti-religious sentiment.

In interviews, many of the parents in the group who seemed to tolerate the few “militant atheist parents” revealed they were bothered by their presence. They said that they usually held their tongues at meetings for the sake of group cohesion. Here is Allison again:

In the group I find it just becomes a religious person bashing get-together. And I can’t stand that. I don’t know, sometimes I see angry atheists [in the group]. These angry atheists that... I think come from religious homes and they are bitter about their upbringing and they are so focused on not being like that that they can’t see the good in [religion] too because there are some good things that come from religion like the comfort that it provides and the afterlife.

Allison seems to view angry atheists as damaged. In her mind, she is free from the weight of bitterness and emotional baggage regarding religion.
Jessica, mother of a four-year-old son and eighteen-month-old daughter, was one of many parents who admitted scaling back participation in the atheist parenting group because of what she saw as anti-religious sentiment.

Don’t tell people in the group but [my husband and I] first joined the group because we thought we might find more people like us. We have found a number of people are anti-religious. Every time some conversation comes up about religion—it’s a conversation like, “How dumb do you have to be to believe that?” And I just don’t like that vibe. I don’t look down on Christians. I understand them. If I express that I have compassion for religious people, it doesn’t go over well. I think many atheists don’t really understand where I am coming from. So what happened was we really don’t have anything in common with them.

Jessica portrays herself as tolerant and compassionate, distancing herself from atheists who mock Christians. In doing so, she has the best of both worlds. She can live her life in a secular manner as she chooses, but she can choose to nurture or sustain ties with religious others by presenting herself as non-threatening to the Christian hegemony.

Maryanne, married mother of four children under the age of ten, describes how she and her husband have stopped participating in the parenting group to avoid militant atheists:

I want my kids to learn character. I don’t want it to necessarily come from a specific source. If they learn about it from Christianity, that’s great. Some atheists are... (pause) some atheists are really anti-religion. Some in the [parenting] group are. It’s one of the main reasons why [my husband and I] don’t go to meetings. They’re anti-religion and I’m not. I’m not afraid of my kids learning about Christianity.
Maryanne aligns herself more closely with the religious mainstream in her approach to parenting than the atheist parents whom she describes as “anti-religion.” In saying that her children might very well benefit from exposure to Christianity, Maryanne implies that atheist parents who deny their kids exposure to Christianity may be denying them a moral foundation.

**Good Atheism as Passive**

Another strategy coexistor parents used to distance themselves from the militant atheist stereotype was to define good atheist parents as passive or unaggressive (non-militant). Coexistor atheists tended to define non-militant as “keeping one’s beliefs to one’s self.” By extension, atheists who publicly avowed atheism or pursued activism were deemed too pushy.

Here is Paula, mother to a toddler daughter, explaining how she sees herself in comparison to militant atheists: “I am not like the militant atheists. I mean, I’m just not pushy about my beliefs. I keep them to myself. I’m not at all militant. They are too pushy, I think. They do more harm than good.” Like many other atheist parents, Paula sees herself as a friendlier, more tolerant kind of atheist than most. She sees herself as the kind of atheist who is “not pushy,” which she defines as keeping her beliefs to herself. By extension, she defines “pushy” as being out in one’s beliefs. This is a condemnation that implicitly sweeps up atheists who do no more than publicly identify themselves as atheist.
Perhaps the most influential figure in setting the tone for coexistor atheism was secular parenting author Dale McGowan. Most of the parents I studied had read McGowan’s books and embraced his “engaged coexistence” philosophy. In a workshop attended by many interviewees and run by McGowan, he urged atheist parents to teach their children to peacefully coexist with religious others. His first two bullet points read:

- Teach engaged coexistence. Religion will always be with us. The eradication of religion is a delusion.
- Encourage religious literacy in children.

These were ideas that many atheist parents found alluring. In accepting the premise that religion will never be eradicated (none present challenged it), atheist parents were encouraged to find a way to live in harmony with religious others.

Later in the workshop McGowan explained how to model “engaged coexistence” for kids:

- Make a show of accepting and valuing the benign rituals of others.
- Teach your kids respect of people and disallow arrogance. Never let them mock or belittle religious people.

McGowan believes atheists’ best chance to “carve out a space for themselves in this pluralistic nation” is to be out in their beliefs but not to fight Christians or try to eradicate organized religion. Parents liked this section of the workshop. Its value depended, however, on coexistor atheists perceiving the rituals of religious others as
benign. Engaged coexistence was harder, for example, for atheist parents who defined a visiting aunt’s pre-meal prayer as harmful to their children.

**Secular Spirituality**

Some coexistor parents took issue with atheists who seemed to reject the value of spirituality in human life. Here is Allison:

> I think I do want little bit of spirituality too... I think atheism is too cut and dry. A lot of the atheists that I know feel like they know everything. I don’t feel like that. I feel like, I don’t know, I mean, there’s no surety of anything.

Jessica shared Allison’s concern about atheism’s hyper-rationality:

> So I’m comfortable with a certain amount of mystery. I prefer a little mystery in life. And I understand that there is a lot we don’t know. And I think that atheists almost worship science, and I don’t trust that either. I think there are a lot of things that we discover even in science that don’t make sense and isn’t even logical the way science is supposed to be.

Jessica and Allison, representatives of a segment of coexistor parents, distanced themselves from the more militant atheists who disparaged all things religious in favor of science.

While many religious people (and even some atheists) might assume that atheists, by definition, hold no interest in spirituality, this did not hold true in my research. Unprompted, a quarter of atheist parents interviewed mentioned a desire for spirituality in their lives. In *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, Comte-Sponville explains the need for atheist spirituality this way:
I loathe obscurantism, fanaticism and superstition. I find nihilism and servility equally repellant. Spirituality is far too important a matter to be left to fundamentalists... Nothing could be worse than letting ourselves be deadlocked into a confrontation between the fanaticism of some—no matter what religion they lay claim to—and the nihilism of others. Far better to combat both, without either conflating them or falling into their respective traps. It remains for atheists to invent a spirituality.... (2006: x)

If militant atheists are the nihilists of which Comte-Sponville speaks, then coexistor atheist parents saw themselves as the reasonable center between (religious) fanaticism and (atheist) nihilism. In presenting themselves as moderate, they could claim moral superiority over both religious fanatics and militant atheists.

Seeking secular spirituality was a gendered phenomenon. Only mothers mentioned desire for mystery or spirituality. Though I would categorize the majority of the atheist fathers interviewed as coexistor atheists, none mentioned a need for spirituality in their lives. This gender difference was exemplified in the case of Rick and Jessica. Parents of two young children, Jessica and Rick both identified as secular—Rick as atheist and Jessica as “agnostic but spiritual.” Jessica explains how she saw their ideological differences regarding spirituality:

Our spirituality is different. I mean we’re really close on almost everything. He’s just a little more—I mean, he would be comfortable saying he’s atheist... Overall we are pretty much on the same page. He would express his beliefs to the kids in terms of fewer doubts. I tend to be more open to not needing to say I know anything for sure. He would tend to be more [likely to say to the kids], “I don’t believe in God.” And I tend to be a little more open-ended and spiritual. I am open to the possibility that there could be a god, but Rick’s not at all.
Since Rick was unwilling to waver from his atheist identity and Jessica clung to her need to be open and comfortable with agnosticism, they attempted to find common ground through their love of debate and discussing spirituality with others. According to Jessica, they did not find the conversation they wanted in the atheist parenting group:

So we are phasing out our participation with that group because we are increasing our participation with the philosophy [group]. We are drawn to these different spirituality discussions that are definitely more on a wavelength of being open-minded and looking at and... doing research and just learning more about all kinds of different aspects about how people worship, how our brain works, how spirituality works and stuff like that. That's the kind of groups we're interested in. The [atheist] parenting group was too closed off from discussing these things. We like to have these kinds of discussions.

The compromise they struck in participating heavily in philosophy groups allowed Rick to retain his atheism, while Jessica could see herself as secular but spiritually agnostic, a murky but comfortable identity. Most importantly, it kept their marriage together, as Jessica could see herself and her husband as “agreeing on almost everything.” It enabled her to feel good about teaching her children about Christianity and allowing her evangelical parents to proselytize to the children. Yet in the process of creating a sense of self as an open-minded spiritual agnostic, she defined most other atheists as close-minded and extreme in their unwillingness to understand Christianity.

I repeatedly fieldnoted a more fervent stance against religion and a call for a more confrontational style of interaction between proselytizing Christians and atheists at (overwhelmingly childless) atheist meetings. While some of the childless atheists’
more radical presentation of self can and should be interpreted as a cathartic venting in
a safe space with like-minded others, atheist parents rarely presented themselves as
confrontational or intolerant of Christians, even though they too were safely
surrounded by other atheists at meetings.

Coexistor atheists, in facing the stigma attached to the highly salient stereotype
of atheists as militant, chose to present themselves in a less threatening manner. They
could thus buffer themselves and their children from the full brunt of prejudice and
discrimination in the Bible Belt South. This strategy also allowed them to maintain
relationships with proselytizing family members. Some used the coexistor strategy to
keep a foothold in Christianity by claiming spirituality and open-mindedness as
important values. But by defining themselves as different from “those atheists,” the
alleged militants scorned by believers, they fed the stereotype that caused many of their
problems in the first place.

CREATING THE FAMILY-FRIENDLY PAGAN

Like atheists, the Pagan parents managed stigma through defensive othering.
They did so by distancing themselves from the stereotypes they found most
threatening: the hedonistic Pagan and the Pagan as flaky hippie. Though some Pagans
refuted these stereotypes, many instead legitimated them by asserting their differences
from “those Pagans.” Pagan parents went farther and sought to project themselves as
family-friendly and authentic. Pagan parents thus hoped to deflect stigma and project an image of being competent parents.

Caroline, Wiccan mother of a toddler son, addressed hedonism in Paganism this way:

There are a lot of Pagans who like to party. [They] drink a lot, do drugs, practice skyclad (nude). I don’t have a problem with that exactly. I mean, to each their own. But I don’t think kids should be around it, and I’m not like that. It’s not good for [kids] to see that stuff...I didn’t mind all that, not that I was ever a huge partier. But I’ve got a kid now. I’m a mom.

Caroline acknowledged hedonism within mainstream Pagan communities, and expressed tolerance for it. But she also claimed that becoming a parent changes things, and thus endorsed segregation in Pagan communities and activities. By recognizing a boundary between what’s appropriate and inappropriate for children, Caroline secured her status as a competent parent.

Kristen, Wiccan high priestess, mother of two daughters, and board member of a family-friendly Pagan organization, described the perception of Pagans as hedonistic with her impressions of the same:

The outside world thinks we raise kids as sex orgy freaks. We are permissive, not really permissive, but open. I mean (chastising an adult male), “No, it’s not consensual sex if it’s with a fourteen-year-old girl.” Pagans allow anyone to join, [such as] homosexuals. Like Christians, we have fringe groups. We have Pagans into weird stuff. I think our fringe groups are in the healthy range. It’s just since we’re so accepting, our fringe members can be really out there.
Kristen begins by pointing out that she is forced to operate as a parent under the assumption that others believe she is raising her children to be “sex orgy freaks.” She also makes an explicit claim to parental protectiveness by noting that older males are not allowed to prey on young women. She then further emphasizes the boundaries between family-friendly Pagans and others. “The fringe Pagans are not in our community,” she said. “They don’t come to places like this. Why would they? They aren’t part of the family.” In referring to the Pagan gathering she attends as “family,” she implicitly invoked the incest taboo to emphasize the asexual nature of her Pagan community.

Researchers have documented Pagans’ liberalism towards nudity, homosexuality, and nontraditional romantic relationships (Jorgensen and Russell 1999). Pagans’ general ethos of tolerance towards “deviant sexualities” places parents in the uncomfortable position of defending their beliefs. In interviews, Pagans mentioned the stereotype of Pagans as sexually perverse. Their ability to raise moral children is thus called into question. Fashioning themselves as “family-friendly” was a way to deflect this stigma.

The family-friendly image was constructed in three ways. First, Pagan groups explicitly described themselves as family-friendly in their mission statements. Next, they chose themes for their gatherings that shaped the boundaries and tone of participation. Finally, organization leaders codified rules that discouraged hedonistic behaviors. Taken together, these strategies allowed Pagan parents to safely distance
themselves from hedonism, while allowing them to maintain their highly-valued ethos of tolerance.

**Codifying Family-Friendly**

Southern Pagan Living (SPL), one of three family-friendly Pagan organizations I observed, expressly built “family-friendly” into the mission statement posted on its website:

SPL events are Child/Family Friendly and we encourage families to bring their children. We have made many efforts to include children in our activities. Children are encouraged to attend workshops and activities unless otherwise stated as "Adult." Elmhurst is a beautiful site and full of places to run, jump and play. Parents are encouraged to bring glow sticks and other accessories for kids to play with after dark.⁴

This statement conveyed two messages. It welcomed Pagans with children (or those who enjoy being around children), and it warned others who don't fit this description to stay away. The family-friendly mission statement, though seemingly all-inclusive, set a boundary between those who belonged and those who didn’t.

SPL went beyond bureaucratic declarations to create a family-friendly Pagan community. They did this by giving family-friendly themes to their gatherings. Below is the description of a summer gathering for SPL:

"It Takes a Village...": Young Maidens sit and listen to the Wisdom of the Mothers and Crones. Old Warriors show the Young Sun Gods that they remember being young. SPL is an

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⁴ All spelling and capitalization (with the exception of names) taken from the SPL website are presented verbatim to preserve the integrity and tone of the data.
opportunity for boys/men, girls/women to have multi-
generational interaction. Our children need examples and
“We” are the ones. This is a time for us to give power and
magick away so that it can grow in the future. Come and
Build a Family Tradition with Your Kids & Ours.

A fall gathering was described this way:

“Can Your Inner Child Come Out To Play?” One of the
quickest ways to get in touch with the Goddess is to
embrace her as mother. The best way to do this is to
become her child. No one knows better how to be a child
than a child. This year we are going to let the children
remind/teach us how to get in touch with our inner
children. We may play games, even skip, jump, dance (did
someone say frolic?). Come ready to let yourself have fun
and just be a kid.

Both events valorized multi-generation interaction. Children were not just tolerated but
venerated as possessing valuable knowledge. Anyone expecting indulgence of
hedonistic impulses would have been disappointed.

Enforcing Family-Friendly

If mission statements and gathering themes did not establish the character and
boundaries of family-friendly Pagan communities clearly enough, formal rules did. The
organizers set limits on adult behaviors by prohibiting nudity, excessive consumption
of alcohol, and loud noise at night. The first set of rules under the heading “Statement
on Nudity/Skyclad”5 pertained to the most controversial element of Paganism for
parents:

5 “Skyclad” refers to ritual work done in the nude.
SPL Does Not Permit Public Nudity, Nor Skyclad Participation at Events. As the Pagan Family and Community grows and changes through the 21st century, We feel it is imperative that we keep SPL events open to all who wish to come and celebrate. Many Pagan paths do not have a charge for nudity, even if your particular path may. Our mission is to "Promote Family Bonds within the Pagan Community," and we feel our definition of family ~ an all-inclusive term with respect to the whole of the Pagan Community ~ dictates this policy.

Approved unanimously by the SPL Planning Group ~July 10, 2009 Subsequently reviewed, edited and renewed by Directors of SPL ~ August 1, 2010

The organizers “unanimously” created these strictures, leaving little doubt that these rules would be enforced. Though the organizers could have stopped with the explanation that not all Pagans are comfortable with skyclad work, they went beyond that initial reasoning to cite their mission of “promoting family bonds.” Rules regarding alcohol and noise, while not mentioning families, also helped to discourage the excess partying that held less appeal for parents of small children.

In summary, Pagan parents attempted to manage the stigma of being stereotyped as hedonistic by accepting that some Pagans are hedonistic, but defining themselves and organizing their gatherings as family-friendly and child safe. They thus sought to minimize discrimination and prejudice from mainstream religious people and other cultural conservatives. This was, however, another case of defensive othering. By distancing themselves from hedonistic Pagans, Pagan parents reinforced the stereotype of Pagans as a group with dubious claims to moral legitimacy.
CREATING THE AUTHENTIC PAGAN

Many outsiders view Pagans’ religion as a phase, lifestyle experiment, or rebellion from Christianity (Barker and Oldridge 2003). In turn, many Pagan parents legitimate this stereotype, while simultaneously distancing themselves from it. In doing so, they engage in defensive othering. In interviews, they accomplished this through establishing authenticity in three ways. First, they identified their Paganism as an authentic religion. Second, some Pagans relied on the ancient roots of Paganism to legitimate modern Paganism. Finally, some used their accounts of coming to Paganism to prove authenticity. They juxtaposed their accounts against the accounts of others they deemed inauthentic.

Paganism as Religion

One way Pagan parents established authenticity was by emphasizing Paganism not as a lifestyle but as a religion. This constitutes defensive othering because, in establishing their own credibility through religion, they first denigrated Pagans they deemed religiously inauthentic. Kristen, high priestess quoted previously, expressed her frustration with “lifestyle Pagans” this way:

I am a high priestess. I studied for many years to become who I am. Unfortunately, a lot of other Pagans don’t bother with the religion at all. They like the tolerance, the self-expression, whatever. But they don’t care a thing about the pantheons of gods and goddesses.
Kristen created a boundary between the in-group (religious Pagans) and the out-group ("lifestyle Pagans"). In doing so, she reinforced the stereotype of the flaky Pagan who is merely looking for a rebellious or counter-culture lifestyle.

At a spring gathering, one of the original co-creators of a large Pagan organization, Ken, explained the place of religion at these gatherings:

> We created this organization as a place where people who followed the old gods and goddesses could come and practice with others who wouldn’t mock them. Of course, at gatherings like this you get all kinds of Pagans. Some are here to study with other serious Pagans [things like] rituals, meditation, connecting with nature, and magic-work. But, of course, there are also some Pagans here that just want to socialize. They like the camaraderie but they’re not as involved in the spiritual aspects as most of us are. It’s all fine by me really.

Though espousing tolerance for non-spiritual Pagans, the organizer elevated the status of “serious Pagans,” whom he described as attending gatherings to learn about religion, not just to “socialize.” In framing the genesis of the organization as a place where Pagans could gather to “practice” Paganism, he implied that religious practice is the main purpose of the group. Though more subtle than Kristen, Ken still participated in defensive othering by creating boundaries between Pagans who are authentic (religious) and those who are not (socializers). He thus reinforced the same stereotypes of Pagans as inauthentic.

Eclectic Pagan mother Clarissa saw many Pagans as role-playing. As she saw it, this was another form of inauthenticity.
A lot of times you will ask [Pagans] about their gods and they really don’t have any clue. They will talk about *THEE* goddess—when somebody says *THEE* goddess I see Jehovah but in drag. To me they’re really not Pagan. [They’re] role-playing.

[Question: What would make somebody a true Pagan instead of a role-playing Pagan?] To me it is very simple. A Pagan is someone who follows the old gods, the old religion; the polytheist that works magic. It is just that simple.

In challenging the authenticity of others, Clarissa established *authentic* Pagans as *religious* Pagans. By deriding “role-playing Pagans,” she elevated her status to authentic, while simultaneously reinforcing the stereotype of the lifestyle Pagan.

Like many Pagan parents I interviewed, Barbara, single mother of two kids, initially struggled with the assumption by Christian family members that her Paganism was a rebellious phase:

My grandma and dad just assumed for a while that I was going through a phase. So, they just ignored it and hoped that it would go away. And my father was like, “When are you going to stop doing this crazy [Pagan] stuff blah blah blah blah.” I guess they just figured I’d actually grow out of it and do their kind of thing (Christianity). So, I said, “It’s not a phase. It’s a religion that I’m serious about and it makes me happy. It’s the right thing for me. Maybe other [Pagans] aren’t so serious about it but it’s for me. I’m not going to change my mind.”

Barbara authenticated her Paganism by distancing herself from the stereotype of the Pagan as engaged in experimentation. Janice, eclectic Pagan, single mother of one elementary-school aged son, used the account of her inauthentic initiation into
Paganism to bolster her current authenticity. After a brief flirtation with Paganism when she was a college student, she later formed what she views as a far more serious connection to authentic Paganism:

But later, I got sober and this is my story. I was sitting on the steps outside [A.A.] and this guy came up and asked, “Have you got a higher power?” I said no. He said, “I suggest you get one. You can borrow mine. I want you to get down on your knees tonight and say OK Joe’s god.” Which I did. It helped for a while. But the first thing I thought of [when choosing a higher power] was Pagan. It was still nagging at me because I had read all of that shit back then in college, but it didn’t click. It was just that I was Gothic. I was so cool. But this was like serious.

Janice’s account of choosing a Pagan higher power in her journey to sobriety adds gravitas to her claim to authenticity. She distances herself not just from other inauthentic Pagans but from her past dabbling in Paganism.

**Historical Legitimation**

Pagan parents also practiced defensive othering by touting Paganism as an ancient religion, while deriding Pagans ignorant of their supposed roots. In the first Pagan meeting I attended, the organizer warned me, “Be prepared. You’re gonna meet a lot of Pagans who don’t know shit about our history, you know? They haven’t taken the time to research Paganism. It’s been around forever but some Pagans don’t do the work [of researching].” In fieldnotes of this meeting I wrote, “Group members appear well-read. They use a lot of Pagan jargon and refer to many points and figures in history as
they relate to Paganism.” The organizer and other members held Pagans who did not venerate the ancient roots of Paganism in contempt.

This type of defensive othering was evident in interviews as well. Clarissa described what she saw as many Pagans’ supposed ignorance of the history of Paganism:

Two-thousand years ago everyone on the planet was Pagan—the aborigine, the Egyptian, the English, the Hindus. Most of them would flip out if you tell them that but it’s true. The Native Americans were all Pagans. Until the Jewish, Christians, and Muslims came out with their one overriding god, there was not that concept of one god. Monotheism is a very modern idea. So when I hear people trying to say that they are Pagans—which is an ancient religion—but they have no clue about the past it drives me crazy.

In citing some Pagans’ ignorance of their roots, Clarissa upheld her identity as a real Pagan. Pagans who did not learn about the roots of Paganism were not authentic.

**Legitimating Authenticity through Accounts**

Other Pagan parents established authenticity through their accounts of coming to Paganism. While accounts needn’t have included defensive othering, many did. In interviews, Pagan parents’ accounts of coming to Paganism were often juxtaposed against those of Pagans they saw as inauthentic. Authenticity accounts emphasized predestiny, free will, essentialism, or some combination of these. For example, Kristen explained the appeal of Paganism to some individuals who she believed were not destined to be Pagan:
Pagans are especially appealing to the lost group, twenty-somethings who know what they don’t want to be, but not what they want to be. As a high priestess, I might be more likely to send them back to their church then to counsel them to stay in the Pagan community. After all, we’re all born to our paths. I believe in predestiny.

In Kristen's opinion, not everyone is meant to be Pagan, and what is meant to be is predetermined through divinity. The “lost group” consists of people predestined to many different religious paths. Yet some of them fight their (Christian) destiny. Kristen sets herself apart as just the opposite. In comparison to “lost,” she is found. She authenticates her Paganism by appeal to the supernatural. An identity chosen by divinity is irrefutable, and fighting destiny would be futile.

Clarissa described the inauthentic “typical Pagan”:

You will find most Pagans are really anti-Christian. They grew up in Christianity and hated it. They are rebelling. We find that in our community all too often. They like pushing people’s buttons. They want to be anti-establishment. That is really what the community is about a lot of the time. It’s about getting together, drinking, calling each other by cool craft names, and [using] secretive jargon. It’s like being a D&D (Dungeons and Dragons) nerd. There are costumes and little funny names. Being cool and counterculture. That is not Paganism to me… I was born Pagan. I’m a third generation witch.

In equating other Pagans with “role players” (D&D), she claimed a more authentic Pagan identity for herself. Also, in describing most Pagans as “really anti-Christian,” she established her own route to Paganism (inherited) as more legitimate than mere rebellion. Real Pagans, according to Clarissa, are seeking something positive, not fleeing from bad experiences with conventional religion.
Mercer, like many parents I interviewed, was introduced to Paganism through Wicca. He described how he went from initially identifying as Wiccan to finding his authentic Norse path:

I got introduced to Paganism when I was in the military through some friends of my ex-wife... Her friends were into Wicca. But I never quite fit in. Wicca is not really a warrior path and that is what I am. I was in the military. I jumped out of planes. Wicca is more of a pacifist way of seeing life. One of my friends said I am going to introduce you to Norse [Paganism]. And he did and I was like, there it is! [It] just felt right instantly! That is the thing about Paganism. You get into it through Wiccan first. So that is kind of the gateway drug. It gets you into it and you go, “Yes, this is right” or you keep trying until something clicks. You have to come to my religion. You don’t become Pagan. You either are or you are not. Once you find out what it is about you will know if that’s what was meant to be. And if it doesn’t click, then no god no [you shouldn’t try to convert].

In this account he establishes that even those meant to be Pagan may initially take a wrong path. Mercer was not alone in this belief. Most of the Pagans I met who identified outside of Wicca, initially explored Paganism through Wicca. They often explained knowing it just didn’t feel right, even as the Pagan path was appealing to them. By beginning to explore other Pagan paths outside of Wicca, they eventually found the path that “just fit.” This road to authenticity was described as an intuitive leap to a predetermined destination. For some, this literally meant belief in predestination, while for others it was more of a matter of understanding what worked for them individually.

Whether claiming authenticity through deliberate individual choice, reliance on the revelation of predestiny, or both, Pagan parents used these accounts to distance themselves from the stereotypical flaky Pagan, who by definition lacks authenticity and
credibility. Pagan parents used accounts of coming to Paganism authentically to attempt to avoid some of the stigma associated with Paganism. As parents, they wanted to be seen as responsible, mature, and consistent—highly valued qualities in parenting. In fashioning these accounts, Pagan parents indirectly pointed a finger at inauthentic Pagans, setting themselves apart from Pagans who they saw as just passing through.

COMPARING DEFENSIVE OTHERING STRATEGIES

Atheist parents engaged in defensive othering to distance themselves from the militant atheist stereotype, while Pagan parents tried to distance themselves from the hedonist and flaky hippie stereotypes. Though both groups engaged in defensive othering, their strategies varied, reflecting their differing needs as parents in the Bible Belt South. These needs, in turn, reflected their divergent cultural standing based on their economic, human, and cultural symbolic capital.

Atheist parents’ engaged in defensive othering strategies to optimize the likelihood of existing peacefully with conventionally religious others. Defensive othering, however, was not their primary defense against stigma and discrimination. Though they felt the need to defend against the stereotype of the militant atheist, they relied on a wealth of other resources to do so. As a result, atheist parents used defensive othering to get along with Christians, but they did not feel the same level of pressure Pagan parents felt to prove their worthiness as individuals or as parents.

In comparison, Pagan parents created segregated family-friendly communities and shared elaborate accounts of coming to Paganism to prove their character. They
were responding to a higher level of threat than atheist parents. Lacking the economic, human, and symbolic capital of their atheist counterparts, Pagans also relied more heavily on defensive othering to resist threats to their custody status, their right to practice their religion, their children’s welfare, and sometimes even their physical safety. For Pagans, the consequences of stigma were higher than they were for atheists.

Pagan parents’ defensive othering demonstrated a stronger need to prove authenticity. Atheist parents’ accounts of coming to their beliefs were less elaborate than Pagans and rarely involved defensive othering. For example, Kristine’s account of coming to atheism was summed up in three sentences:

> Once I started really thinking, really looking at [religion], it didn’t make any sense. Once that God switch was turned off, I couldn’t turn it back on. Or maybe I should say once that critical thinking switch was turned on, I couldn’t turn it back off.

Her account is short and unapologetic, expressing little need to prove sincerity.

Pagan parents, on the other hand, shared lengthy accounts fraught with an urgency to prove sincerity, accounts that often included defensive othering. They distanced themselves from Pagans deemed immoral or inauthentic. Through defensive othering they sought to dispel association with the greatest threat to parents: the possibility of losing custody of their children. One-third of Pagan parents (but not one atheist) expressed this fear.
Establishing authenticity was largely a matter of personal happiness and pride for atheists, while for Pagans it was a matter of practical urgency. Pagan Kristen recounted her various run-ins with authority figures:

I had (social services) at my house, even utilities people. The neighbor reported she saw something strange in my pond, and the utilities people had to check. My neighbors have called everybody on me because I’m Pagan. They even called the SPCA because they said I killed cats. People have called the police on me so often, they stopped coming. People think you’re recruiting witches and raising sex-crazed orgy freaks. I taught a Pagan parenting class to help Pagans deal with DSS or divorce. I went through the whole witchcraft thing in divorce court.

Kristen dealt with repeated legal challenges, culminating in court-ordered Baptist church attendance with her children as part of her custody settlement. Three Pagan interviewees reported having already had their custody challenged. Two claimed to have lost custody. Defensive othering was perhaps a way to mitigate fears of facing these kinds of troubles.

Pagans’ defensive othering also reflects lack of symbolic capital in U.S. culture. They lack mainstream acceptance of their beliefs in magic, polytheism, and human divinity. Atheist parents, on the other hand, can and do tap into powerful symbolic capital in their reliance on science and logic—elements of a secular worldview that most Christians accept. This cultural common ground gave atheists an edge over Pagans when it came to fitting in with the mainstream. Despite their greater resources, atheist parents nonetheless worried that their children could be targets of hostility. More frequently they worried about criticism and rejection by Christian family members (a
particular source of conflict for both atheists and Pagans that I will examine in chapter 4).

Comparing the two groups helps us to see the conditions under which certain defensive strategies are likely to be used. The relatively well-resourced atheists distanced themselves from atheist warriors—a group of creditable, if sometimes obnoxious, intellectuals. The more vulnerable Pagans felt the need to distance themselves, and distance themselves farther, from more seriously discrediting stereotypes. Though both groups face stigma in the Bible Belt South, they negotiate that stigma in ways that reflect their varied resources and standings in the broader culture.

CONCLUSION

In an attempt to maintain the status quo in which they hold privilege, majority group members often accuse minorities of holding extreme ideologies or of hiding radical agendas. Journalist Susan Faludi documented this in her 1991 book Backlash, noting how defenders of patriarchy tried to cast all feminists as militant radicals incapable of reason and moderation. This tactic of marginalizing dissident minorities is what gives rise to defensive othering.

Paradoxically, however, defensive othering can reproduce the inequalities minority group members are fighting. In defining themselves in opposition to hedonistic Pagans, Pagan parents legitimate the stereotype of the overindulgent, irresponsible and even lecherous Pagan. By defining themselves as “family friendly,”
they inadvertently define other Pagans as “anti-family.” By defining themselves as “passive,” atheists define other atheists as militant. Atheist and Pagan parents thus inadvertently reproduce the very inequality they are defending themselves against.

Atheist and Pagan parents faced stigma prior to becoming parents. However, many successfully avoided stigma by passing,6 lying, or avoiding contact with “stigma symbols” (Goffman, 1963), objects or behaviors that might alert people to their atheist or Pagan identity. The handful of atheists and Pagans who had previously lived openly in their beliefs did so because they felt capable of accepting the consequences or defending themselves. However, in my research, parents, like atheist Kelly, repeatedly emphasized how “becoming a parent just changed everything.” This sentiment was echoed by Pagan parents. With the presence of children, atheists and Pagans suddenly found themselves having to account for their beliefs as parents. Christian family members, among others, repeatedly forced the issue by inquiring about baptisms, church affiliation, and religious preschools (explored in chapter 4).

In the Christian hegemony of the Bible Belt South, atheist and Pagan parents alike found themselves defending their moral fitness as parents. The same atheists and Pagans who used to avoid stigma when childless now reported feeling obligated to be out in their beliefs, which meant they now needed to manage stigma. Parents expressed the need to be open and honest in front of their children as part of being a “good parent.” As they saw it, the main responsibilities of a parent—to protect their children

6“Passing” refers to actions taken on the part of the “discreditable” to conceal their own identity and to be seen instead as “normal” (Goffman, 1968). In this case, “normal” usually implies passing as Christian.
from harm and to raise them to be confident and moral—upped the ante of managing their stigmatized identities carefully. The goal was to minimize hostility directed at themselves and their children.

The coping strategies of atheist and Pagan parents make sense. Parents are especially vulnerable to the charge of being somehow morally deficient. Defensive othering deflected this charge by communicating, in effect, the message that *Unlike some of those genuinely bad atheists/Pagans, we are good, moral people, and by implication good parents as well*. But taking this interactionally safe route comes with a cost: affirming the damaging prejudices of the dominant group. Though unintended, the message parents send to others (including their children) through defensive othering is a message of compromise and acquiescence, rather than resistance.

When minority members engage in defensive othering and affirm the prejudices of the dominant group, they make life harder for those who will suffer because of those prejudices. Defensive othering can also undermine solidarity within minority groups, thus making social justice struggles more difficult. The overall consequence is to reinforce the inequalities that disadvantage minority group members in the first place.

The fact that defensive othering was widely used by the parents I studied illustrates the power of Christian hegemony in the Bible Belt South. Christianity as the gold standard remains unchallenged when religious minorities engage in defensive othering. Though minorities may only seek to avoid stigma, by engaging in defensive othering they shine a spotlight on the actions of others in their group who choose to act
differently. Whenever an atheist or Pagan passes as Christian to avoid an uncomfortable interaction, it is all the more difficult for the next person—the next atheist or Pagan—to identify as not religious or not Christian. Thus what makes sense situationally for an individual trying to avoid stigma can set back the effort to create tolerance and equality.

In this chapter I described how atheist and Pagan parents used defensive othering to manage stigma. While this stigma management was related to parenting, it was not part of parenting per se. In the next chapter I compare the ways that atheist and Pagan parents used their belief systems and varying resources to influence their children’s definitions of reality, as well as their moral character. I will show how atheist parents tried to instill in their children a secular, scientific worldview, and how Pagan parents taught their children to see the world as full of magic and mystery.
CHAPTER 3

FROM SCIENCE TO MAGIC: COMPARATIVE CHILDHOOD SOCIALIZATIONS

In this chapter I compare and contrast the ways that atheist and Pagan parents try to shape their children’s definitions of reality as well as their moral character. Atheist parents tend to pass on their version of reality that is based primarily on science, logic, and nature. They do this by normalizing science and logic for their via toys, books, movies, and outings; teaching their kids to think critically; and responding to existential questions regarding life, death, and human purpose in a naturalistic and scientific manner. Pagan parents seek to transmit a transcendental sense of reality to their children. They accomplish this by anthropomorphizing nature and material objects, encouraging kids to engage in magic play, and teaching kids to acknowledge, trust, and act on intuition as a divine power.

Stemming from their differential socialization of children, atheist parents emphasize the value of competitive individualism to their kids, while Pagan parents emphasize creative individualism to their kids. While both groups of parents interpret their parenting choices in an individualist manner, behind every socialization strategy lurks the influence of Christian hegemony. Atheist and Pagan parents wrestle with perceptions of Christian parenting as the “gold standard.” Ultimately, both groups of parents perceive their parenting style as superior to Christian parenting, though for different reasons.
SOCIALIZATION INTO A SCIENTIFIC WORLDVIEW

Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted common sense knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from and maintained by social interactions. Parents are the first purveyors of social knowledge for children. As such, parents draw upon their personal worldviews in parenting. For atheist parents, this meant relaying to their children the messages that the world is natural and that science is the best means to make sense of it.

Atheist parents stress to their children a version of truth and reality based on science, logic, and nature. They hope to teach their children not only to rely on naturalistic interpretations of reality but to encourage passion for the pursuit of truth and knowledge through science. They attempted to accomplish this by giving their children science toys, immersing kids in world religions and mythologies, pointing out news stories about scientific discoveries, taking their children to museums, emphasizing the value of questioning conventional wisdom, and offering naturalistic accounts of life and death. This type of socialization demanded an energetic, intentional, and sustained effort to steep children in a scientific worldview—with awareness that this worldview was in contention with the religious worldviews kids would encounter outside the home. This type of involved parenting is what Hays (1996) refers to as “intensive parenting.”
Science Immersion

Atheist parents introduced their children to science and nature through the use of toys, books, videos, educational programs, and outings. During interviews in homes, many atheist parents pointed out books, videos, and toys they bought their children in attempts to pass on acceptance and value for science and nature. Atheist parents often swapped suggestions for science-friendly materials at meetings or on the group’s online message board. Secular parenting author Dale McGowan provided atheist parents a lengthy list of science or nature-themed films, broken down by age-appropriate categories, at his secular parenting workshop. While use of specific toys, books, and videos was meant to aid with the scientific socialization of children in the privacy of their homes, atheist parents also introduced their kids to a scientific worldview in concert with like-minded others.

At Camp Quest, a weeklong summer camp for kids of atheists, adult camp counselors walked kids through various science experiments every day. For example, one day kids were given Geiger counters and asked to walk through the camp and monitor and record levels of radiation. They also learned about geological formations and the science of making ice cream, among other things. According to one volunteer counselor, “Our job is to show kids how to think like scientists and to make sure they have fun while doing it so that it will stick.” This summer camp was one way atheist parents attempted to immerse their children in a scientific worldview.
Over one-quarter of atheist parenting group meetings were devoted to science or nature-themed children’s outings. One set of fieldtrips focused on the theme of nanoscience. A contributor to the atheist parenting group message board described these fieldtrips in the following way:

NanoDays is a big day for little science!
Atoms...molecules...particles, oh my! Meet nanoscientists as they present hands-on programs and interactive demonstrations. Join scientists to learn about nanoscience, the study of really tiny things like molecules. Tour laboratories. View a "Dragonfly TV" episode about nanoscience.

These well-attended outings typified the science-based activities into which atheist parents tried to immerse their children.

Other nature or science-themed group outings included camping, nature hikes, and a visit to the zoo. Museum exhibits included “Animal Grassology” at the Museum of Natural History, and “Megaladon” and “Dinosaur Trail” at the Museum of Life and Science. Special exhibits at museums were popular for several reasons. First, atheist parents reported taking their kids to local museums often. Many parents purchased annual passes to local museums. Special exhibits kept museums fresh to kids who might otherwise lose interest. Second, special exhibits provided opportunities for kids to interact with adult specialists, allowing kids the opportunity to gain increasing confidence in dealing with authority figures. Finally, special exhibit organizers found creative ways to take complex fields (such as nanoscience) and present them in ways that appealed to children. The museums seemingly catered specifically to the needs of these kinds of children and parents.
Atheist parents expressed hope that these outings would both educate and nurture lifelong passion for science in their children. As Paula explained, “It’s not enough that I teach [my kids] what science is. I want them to be blown away by how cool it all is, like I am.” She also hoped to convey to her daughter the emotional connection she experienced:

The whole universe is so fascinating and we learn so much more all the time! The things I learned as a kid aren’t true anymore. Now we know what the rings of Saturn are made of and that Pluto is not a planet. We keep learning.

Paula viewed reality as highly complex and scientific understandings as always evolving. She focused on change as exciting, and hoped she could transfer her own enthusiasm for scientific discovery to her daughter.

Atheist parents aimed to inspire passion for lifelong scientific inquiry in their children. Many saw emotional manipulation as a legitimate strategy for doing this. Grant, father to six-year-old twin sons, explained the appeal of a museum workshop on volcanoes: “I can tell [my kids] about volcanoes, but if they can make one that actually has a lava flow [then] they’ll feel the thrill and that’s it. They’ll do the rest. They’ll become the scientists.” Atheists used books, videos, toys, and outings in a multi-pronged approach to arouse a passion for science in their children. Doing all of this required intensive parenting. In addition to instilling a love of science, atheist parents also sought to teach their children to think critically.
When asked about the most valuable lesson secular parents could hope to impart to their children, 80% of atheist parents responded with (some version of) “teaching kids to think critically.” At meetings, in interviews, and in secular parenting books, teaching kids critical thinking skills stood as a primary goal. It was the default response to the commonly fielded question of the benefits of secular parenting.

In defense of what they perceived to be a relentless attack on secular parenting by much of society, atheist parents prepared informal “elevator speeches” on the benefits of secular parenting. In his workshop on secular parenting, Dale McGowan guided parents through an exercise in creating these one-minute speeches. The majority of workshop participants mentioned “teaching kids critical thinking” somewhere in their one-minute speech.

Atheist parents defined critical thinking as “[kids] being able to make their own decisions without being blindly led like sheep,” “becoming able to see through superstitions and superficial unsubstantiated ideas,” or as “sharpen[ing] their ability to think things through logically.” The shared goal of nurturing critical thinking skills in children became an identity marker within the atheist parenting organization; the language of “critical thinking” identified parents who were “in the know.” However, in interviews many of these parents initially struggled to articulate how they socialized their kids to gain critical thinking skills.

Pushed for a response, atheist parents described using what those in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning community refer to as inquiry-guided learning...
(IGL) techniques. Though atheist parents never used the terminology of professional educators, their approach to teaching children critical thinking skills closely paralleled inquiry-guided learning:

Inquiry-guided learning refers to an array of practices that promotes learning through guided and, increasingly, independent investigations of questions for which there are no single answer. Learning in this way ... nurtures curiosity, initiative, and risk taking. It promotes critical thinking. (North Carolina State University's First Year Inquiry Program: http://www.ncsu.edu/firstyearinquiry)

Atheist parents’ actions mirrored common IGL practices but shifted over time to reflect children’s maturation. Jim described how he guided his toddler daughter through a problem:

[My daughter] Mandy and I were playing ball and it rolled under the couch. She [asked] me to get it. I calmly asked her, “How can you get the ball?” She could see it but it was out of reach. I stood back and watched. You have to let kids figure stuff out on their own. She peeked under the couch, circled it, and stuck her arm underneath a few times but it couldn’t reach. I asked her, “If that doesn’t work, what will?” So she stared at it for a while and eventually popped her head up, looked around and found a [baseball] bat. Then I knew she had it. She pushed it and it rolled out. She’s only three and she did that without my help.

Though Jim claimed his daughter solved her problem “without [his] help,” it is clear that this account is not entirely accurate. Rather, he acted in such a way that prompted Mandy to use logic and experimentation to solve her problem. He chose to encourage her to investigate solutions. He encouraged her to claim the problem as her own (“How can you get the ball?”). When he saw she was stuck on one strategy, he prompted her to
consider pursuit of a new action ("If that doesn't work, what will?"). This guided investigation became an age-appropriate lesson in critical thinking, mirroring the intense efforts of many atheist parents to lay the groundwork for teaching critical thinking skills to children from very young ages on.

At a workshop, secular parenting author Dale McGowan suggested, "Whenever possible, encourage kids' questions but do not answer them directly. See if you can't turn the question back on them so they can figure out an answer." Atheist parents began to use this technique with children as they passed out of the toddler stage and headed toward kindergarten. Here is how Kristine described a conversation she had with her five-year-old son:

A few months ago he said matter-of-factly, "Mama, crows are bad luck." So I asked why. He said, "They're black." So I asked, "How does that make them bad luck?" He couldn't answer. Then, I told him about superstitions like "Step on a crack, break your mama's back." He thought that was funny. I said, "It's funny but is it true?" He said no. I told him, "Things you hear—crows are bad luck, black cats—they're funny but not true. If you can't figure out a reason for it then it's probably not true." I am trying to instill critical thinking.

Rather than reject her son's statement about crows in an authoritarian fashion, Kristine prompted her son to pursue a line of inquiry and reach his own conclusion. She believed this to be an effective strategy for teaching critical thinking skills, as evidenced in the rhetorical question she posed at the end of this example, "What in the world is a child really going to learn if you just tell them everything?"
Joe was faced with a common secular parenting dilemma. One day his five-year-old son Bryan asked, “Daddy, is Santa real?” Joe readily admitted to the group that this was a particularly tough question for him. Though he identified as atheist, Joe incorporated the mythology of Santa Claus into his son’s celebration of Christmas. He feared that if he answered yes, he would set a precedent of lying. However, if he answered no, he could upset his young son, who still valued the idea of a magical bringer of gifts. Joe asked his son:

“What do you think? Does that seem likely? How would [Santa] do all that?” The point is not to get him to come to the right answer immediately. It’s to get him to figure it out for himself. He decided that Santa is real and magical. (Shrugging his shoulders) At least he’s working it out in his head. It was difficult for him. He’s very young. Eventually, he’ll see through the magic answer.

By guiding young children to embark on a line of reasoned inquiry, parents like Kristine and Joe claimed to place the onus of coming to reasoned conclusions on their children’s shoulders. When responding to what they saw as nonsense, atheist parents tried to nurture critical thinking skills in their children.

At Camp Quest, counselors engaged older kids in critical thinking by posing them a challenge. They began camp by gathering the kids and explaining to them that two unicorns lived in the woods surrounding the camp. The kids were told that the unicorns couldn’t be seen or heard. They neither ate nor left material evidence of their existence. Evidence of their existence existed solely in the form of an ancient text to which kids had no access. They challenged campers to prove that the unicorns did not exist, with a cash reward as an incentive. Of course, no camper could actually prove the unicorns did
not exist under such conditions. The exercise, meant to demonstrate the gap between faith and science (among other things), led to multiple fire-side conversations between kids and counselors.

Atheist parents hoped their children would come to the conclusion that all religions were made-up. Yet their parenting style negated the most efficient manner of teaching that lesson. They could not just tell kids that religion was made up and therefore should be avoided. Instead, a common strategy was to deluge children with so many creation stories and religious myths that kids would come to the conclusion that none could be true. This strategy was heavily suggested by author and workshop presenter Dale McGowan.

Many atheist parents saw this strategy as fulfilling two important goals they held as parents. First, they explicitly expressed desire that their children become religiously literate. They saw this as crucial to their ability to understand the world and other people. Secondly, this strategy allowed them to seemingly maintain a “hands-off” approach on the topic of religion, while actually nudging their children toward the conclusion that religions must be made up if people cannot agree on one version. Atheist parents structured the situation so that their children would freely arrive at this foregone conclusion.

Atheist parents embraced what I call “stewardship parenting.” Rejecting authoritarianism and strict hierarchy in parent-child relations, they saw their parental role as transitory guardian to a temporarily vulnerable human being. Therefore, they
took seriously the job of preparing their children to make independent, reasoned decisions. They wanted their children to possess critical thinking skills they thought would ensure their children’s success. However, atheist parents also wanted their children to choose to become atheist. Concern that their children might instead choose to embrace religion prompted some clever manipulation on the parts of atheist parents. In pointing this out, I do not mean to impugn the intentions of atheist parents. In fact, I would argue that most parents encourage their children to believe as they do. Atheists are by no means unique in this seeming contradiction. They very much wanted to allow their children the freedom to choose for themselves, but given their belief that religion might limit their children’s future success, this freedom created a level of anxiety that led many parents to “stack the deck” in favor of atheism. The one noted exception—where atheist parents chose to give answers, rather than guide children to answers—involved questions about existential matters.

**Life’s “Big Questions”**

Atheist parents were acutely aware that they were seen by conventionally religious others as having little to offer children on matters of life and death. The parents I studied were sensitive to this accusation, as it cut to the heart of their worth as parents. Many feared their children could be vulnerable to the appeal of religion if they didn’t address these issues from a secular perspective. Parents hoped to preempt
vulnerability to conventionally religious interpretations by offering naturalistic interpretations of life and death.

Since many parents in this study had children too young to ponder the meaning of life and death, atheists attempted to set the stage for future existential discussions. They accomplished this by emphasizing life’s purpose as grounded in nature and human connectivity, and by infusing naturalistic interpretations of human life and death in daily dialog.

As Cathy, mother to a newborn daughter, explained, "My daughter will never grow up wondering if there’s any purpose to [life]. I look forward to having lots of conversations with her about family, community, charity. These are all things I find extremely meaningful." Cathy planned to teach her daughter that human purpose is achieved through human connections and helping. Joe aimed for a more transcendental outlook: “I take my sons outside. I tell them, ‘Look up. You’re both part of all that—the sun, the moon, the stars. Isn’t that amazing?’ We’re part of a much bigger picture, something so powerful and we all play our part.” Joe’s approach differed from Cathy’s in that Cathy focused on deriving meaning from relationships, while he emphasized human connection to nature.

To many atheist parents, a purely naturalistic account of life’s purpose was not enough. They felt that the idea that life had no innate meaning might frighten children. This is not surprising as atheist parents, like other parents, recognized the appeal to small children of belief in fairy tales and magic. As parents, they wanted to protect their
children from harsh realities until they were mature enough to handle the truth as espoused in an atheist, naturalistic fashion. Yet, atheist parents were split on these issues; some chose to “sugar-coat” naturalistic interpretations, while still others hoped to expose their children to these interpretations at as young an age as possible to preempt the appeal of religion. Their concern for their children’s well-being was heightened when it came to discussing the meaning of death, leading many atheist parents to begin discussing nature and death before their children experienced meaningful loss.

Death was one of the toughest issues for atheist parents to talk to their children about. When we spoke, Kelly had been contemplating how she and her partner would talk to her son about death:

[Talking to our son about death] is something that we will have to deal with now because a dear friend has terminal cancer. I’m going to have to tell [my son] something. He is going to start asking me what happens when we die. For me, that is not a religious question. But for most people it is. In his preschool class, their hamster died. When I asked him about it he said, "Teddy’s body just stopped working so we put him in a box and buried him under a tree." And I thought that is great. As far as I’m concerned that is what happened. I don’t think it has occurred to him that a part of you might not be buried under that tree. He does not know about reincarnation or heaven. But he is about to go to the funeral [of our friend] and he is going to hear things like heaven that will not make sense. I have thought about how I am going to deal with this. I really think I’m going to tell him that our friend’s body just stopped working and we’re going to bury him. That is age-appropriate and it’s the truth.
Kelly’s explanation of death was naturalistic and mechanical—the body viewed as an organic machine that doesn’t last forever. In formulating this explanation, she drew upon the familiar. By building upon the one experience her son had had with death (the class hamster), she used an interpretation already seemingly accepted by her son and reinforced by his teacher.\footnote{This teacher was a Montessori educator. Many atheist parents relied on Montessori education and educators to back up their naturalistic worldviews, as I will discuss later.}

Not all atheist parents were comfortable with a naturalistic account of death. Here is Megan:

> When it comes time to talk to my son about death, I won’t lie to him. I won’t promise an afterlife. But kids need something more than, “Hey, we die, rot, and decompose.” I think I would emphasize how we all live on forever in our deeds and in other people’s memories.

Megan viewed an account like Kelly’s as unnecessarily harsh. Megan therefore planned to provide her son with what she viewed as a compromise: a grounded but transcendental version of death. The account of living on through others’ memories transcends the mundane while eschewing the supernatural.

Dale McGowan’s workshop for atheist parents included an exercise to help parents assuage kids’ fears of death. It also served to reinforce the logic of death as natural and allowed secular parents yet another way to side-step a purely naturalistic account of death. As McGowan advised parents: “If your kids express fear of death ask them if they remember what it was like before they lived. Then assure them that since
we have experienced nonexistence before this life, we know there is nothing to be afraid of.”

Whether using books, toys, videos, outings, critical thinking exercises, or providing accounts of life and death, atheist parents’ goal was to steep their children in naturalistic and scientific worldviews. They sought to give their kids the tools to think critically. While atheist parents wholeheartedly embraced the rhetoric of individuality and free choice, their efforts were aimed at nurturing specific worldviews—worldviews that looked a lot like their own. Atheist parents’ efforts resulted in the transmission of a moral code, one based on belief in competitive individualism.

COMPETITIVE INDIVIDUALISM

For reasons explored later in this chapter, atheist parents embraced strong belief in the value of competitive individualism—the view that achievement should depend on merit. Under such an ideology, effort and ability become prerequisites for success. Competition is seen as a means to bring out the best in people and a legitimate means of distributing resources. Atheist parents hoped to prepare their children to face what they viewed as a highly competitive world.

Atheist parents’ motivations for embracing competitive individualism came, for some, in strong reaction to the perceived relationship between their own parents and religion. Many atheists believed their parents relied on religion as a crutch, giving up individual power. Kristine, for example, observed this in her father’s life:
I wouldn’t want to distance myself from [my father] because he is my father but I can’t tolerate his attitude. It makes me crazy! I just want to shake him and yell, “You make your life the way it is. You make the choices in your life. And that goes back to the whole religion thing. “Quit praying for God to make your life better... Go out and make your life better.” It just makes me crazy! [Question: Do you think secular people are more likely to be proactive?] We make our lives what they are, you know? I don’t believe there is some hidden agenda that God has. You make your decisions. If you make bad decisions it sucks for you. Try not to make bad decisions. Try to do the right thing. Try to make your life good without making other people’s lives bad.

Kristine expressly connected her father’s failures in life to his reliance on what she viewed to be a passive (religious) and ineffective lifestyle. Sentiments like Kristine’s echoed throughout interviews.

Many atheists interpreted their mother’s passivity in life as stemming directly from patriarchal dictates of religion. Here is Verna:

It seems like my mother has never made a decision in her life. It’s always (mimicking a weak tone), “What does [my husband] say I should do? What does my pastor say I should do? What does the Bible say I can do?” And that means she never has to own up to any mistakes but it also means she never gets any credit. I can’t identify.

Kristine and Verna, as well as a handful of other atheists, saw their parents as having chosen to relinquish personal power to religious authorities. In their desire to live their lives in a more agentic fashion, atheist parents upheld the value of personal decision-making and accountability. In turn, they expressed strong desire to impart these values to their children.
Atheist parents used a number of strategies to nurture competitive individualism in their children. They verbally emphasized hard work as the means to achieving independence as adults, the consummate life goal. Many relied on private Montessori education to reinforce values of competitive individualism, particularly when they were unwilling or unable to transmit said values at home. Finally, parents separated children’s play time from work time, creating an adult-like hierarchy that elevated work over play. Through a combination of these strategies, atheist parents hoped their children would internalize values of internally-derived motivation, responsibility, and self-reliance.

Hard Work and Independence

Atheist parents expressed a desire to relay to kids values they believed would lead to success in life. Here Paula describes what she wants for her daughter:

I want her to be a decision maker. What we have been concentrating on is problem solving. I want her to think things through. Make your own decisions. I want her to have that sense of inner joy and self-reliance so that she doesn’t have to feel like she’s not capable of taking care of herself or other people.

Paula associated individual independence with “inner joy.” Like many other atheists, she placed great value on developing an internal locus of control. Socializing kids to become self-reliant was held to be the consummate parenting goal. Atheist parents defined self-reliance in terms of the iconic American Dream: earned financial and
emotional independence. Like many Americans with libertarian leanings, atheist parents overlooked interdependence to focus on a utopian state of self-reliance.8

One evening at a book group meeting, Allison began the discussion by describing the struggle she and her husband were having with their five-year-old daughter Madison:

What do y’all do when your child insists to you that Jesus made everything? Has this happened to any of you? Jessica and Rob nod their heads [yes]. Allison continues, Madison must have picked this up when I worked at a Christian daycare. [Question: What do you do?] Each night before dinner I thank Vince (her husband) for working so that we have the money for food. And then he says, “I thank Allison for cooking our dinner.” Then Madison still adds, “I thank Jesus for everything.”

Vince and Allison took issue with their daughter’s eagerness to thank Jesus for the fruits of human labor. In keeping with a stewardship style of parenting, they replaced their daughter’s Christian “grace” with a secular “grace.” Working in tandem, this couple role-modeled their belief in how gratitude should be expressed from a secular worldview. In doing so, they implicitly underscored the values of competitive individualism—effort, ability, and achievement.

As Allison shared her struggle her anxiety mounted, evident in her strained voice:

It’s really important to [me to] teach Madison to be gracious to the people in her life who work damn hard to provide for her. Stephanie interjects excitedly, “We work our asses off and Jesus gets the credit. It’s a problem.”

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8 A large percentage of atheists I studied politically self-identified as libertarian. Their parenting, therefore, further reflected their political ideologies and focus on individualism and meritocratic ideologies.
this point Allison seems frustrated. Jessica interjects sympathetically, “But she hears you. If you’re telling her you don’t believe in Jesus and you are thanking Vince for working for food each night you can’t tell me she isn’t storing that away.” Others nod enthusiastically.

Atheist parents wanted their children to embrace a secular, meritocratic ideology that prescribes reward for human effort. To many atheist parents, thanking God or Jesus for human labor amounted to misappropriating credit.

It was important to atheist parents that their children understood that material benefits required human effort. The following discussion immediately broke out after the exchange above:

Danielle: I can’t stand the princess thing. [Our daughter] has all of it. I mean, it’s not just the dolls. It’s the life-size castle, the bed sheets, the costumes. Her room is a palace. I didn’t have any of that growing up. I worry about what that does to her.

Stephanie: Our daughter is the same. It’s all princess. All of her friends have the princess stuff. You can’t escape it.

(Danielle’s husband Rob leans in to the group with a serious look on his face) I think the responsibility of a parent is to create good citizens, able to live independently. But we both worry (pointing to his wife). We came from next to nothing. We didn’t have fancy schools, toys. We had to work hard. How are our kids gonna learn that when all they’ve ever known is this? (Pointing to the accoutrements of the upper-middle class lifestyle their home holds—leather couches, high-end finishings, and expensive décor. Two other parents nod their head in strong agreement while the other three remain silent.)

Rob and Danielle (and other atheist parents interviewed) attributed their rise from the working class to the upper middle class to ambition and hard work. In their minds, their
working-class childhoods instilled desire for achievement. By raising their daughters (and sons) in upper-middle-class surroundings, many atheist parents feared their children would not acquire a strong work ethic. Yet they were unwilling to withhold upper-middle-class resources. They knew these resources could benefit their kids, but worried that providing too many resources might undermine their kids’ motivation to work hard.

Atheist parents relied on other institutions to reinforce their values of competitive individualism. Over half of the atheist parents interviewed sent their children to private Montessori schools. Montessori education was embraced by atheist parents for several reasons. At the most superficial level, atheist parents expressed appreciation for the consistently secular (or religiously pluralist) approach Montessori schooling provided. However, atheist parents also used Montessori education to reinforce competitive individualism in young children.

Paula explains why she sent her daughter to a Montessori school:

Montessori school is a great fit because [the kids] are always busy with tasks. [Going to] school is not a choice. [My husband and I] are trying to keep in mind that our job is to raise a human being. And in our culture you are going to have some kind of job; a way to make money. So for her right now that [job] is school. (As if speaking to her daughter) “No you can’t say I don’t feel like going to school today. I understand. Sometimes we don’t feel we want to work either but this is what you’ve got to do.”

For Paula, Montessori principles aligned with values of hard work, sacrifice, independence, and maturity—values she felt were imperative for parents to teach their
children. Like many parents in a capitalist society, Paula saw occupational success as the kind that mattered most.

In an interview, Nicole Boulet, a professional Montessori educator with years of experience in Montessori schools, described the premises and tactics of Montessori education:

Montessori principles include belief that children can be as intelligent as you let them. When a child enters a class the first time, you look them in the eye and shake their hand. The brain is highly absorbent at young ages. Montessori educators believe in teaching young children concepts they don’t yet understand so when the time comes their minds will be open to it.

Montessori educators treat children like adults (“look them in the eye and shake their hand”). This approach is meant to prepare children for the real world, one whose principal organizing feature is competition. The upper-middle-class atheist parents saw this form of education as instilling the independent spirit and a strong work ethic their children needed to be successful professionals.

Time Hierarchies

Atheist parents also reinforced competitive individualism in children in much the same way many American parents do: by separating play time from work time. Atheist parents, with the assistance of Montessori educators, created a firm divide between work and leisure. This divide was intended to mirror the adult world for which children were being readied.
Atheist parents’ division of children’s play time and work time was never explicitly discussed in interviews, nor did it jump out at me in observations. In fact, this strategy became apparent only because it stood out against the reluctance of Pagan parents to so clearly compartmentalize play time and work time in their children’s lives. In American culture, parents are expected to teach children to distinguish between play and work (Kohn 1969, Lareau 2003). This is presumed to help instill a good work ethic in children. Play, in this view, is not a right but a reward for work well done.

Atheist parents, like conventionally religious parents, encouraged kids to play and imagine (on appropriate occasions, such as play dates, atheist parenting meetings, and outings to play centers and parks). However, they reinforced competitive individualism by solidifying boundaries between work and play (i.e., discouraging play during our interviews, before bedtime, during meals, during “work time” at school, etc.). Under this logic, a child who learned to strictly separate work and play would become a child far more likely to succeed in competitive institutions, like school, that value work over play.

Atheist parents tried to stress to their children that success depended on their decision to achieve, and then on pursuing the goals they set for themselves. Kristine explained to me how she used specific language in the parenting of her five-year old son: “I try to instill this in my son. [I tell him] you decide if your day is going to be bad. You get up in the morning and I tell him you need to say to yourself, ‘I am going to listen to my teacher today. I am going to get my work done so I don’t have to miss recess.’”
Kristine didn't really expect her son to navigate life unaided. She did, however, encourage him to be self-directing and goal-oriented.

Kristine believed this socialization to be working:

[My son] has started using the terminology I use on him. When he was sent to the office for playing when he should have been working, he said, "Ms. Johnson sent me to the office but I was about to make the decision to do my work." It’s funny his teacher uses the same terminology. I’ve used it a lot more now that I know she does. When he said that I thought, He is getting that self-fulfilling, you-make-life-what-you-want-it-to-be philosophy.

Kristine and her son’s Montessori teacher worked in tandem to shape her son’s behavior by attempting to elevate values of motivation and individual choice over play. Though atheist parents embraced values of competitive individualism, they also knew that, left unchecked, such a worldview could lead a child toward arrogance, indifference to the suffering of others, or even cruelty. They took other steps to make these negative consequences less likely.

**TEMPERING COMPETITIVE INDIVIDUALISM**

Atheist parents encouraged an ethos of competitive individualism in hopes that their children would become sufficiently ambitious to achieve middle- to upper-middle-class status for themselves. This introduced a complication, however, because atheist parents did not want their children to be selfishly competitive, nor to take their class privileges for granted. They were well aware that many conventionally religious people questioned their ability to transmit morality to children. To a small degree, atheist
parents shared some of these fears. Though they stressed the importance of hard work, competition, and critical thinking, they wanted their children to be empathetic and cooperative when appropriate. And so they tried to teach their children to recognize the human potential in everyone, and to think about why—as a kind of social scientific puzzle—some people are able to develop potential, while others are not. They also tried to instill values of tolerance and empathy.

Nurturing Empathy

In interviews, the second most common response to the question, What are the most important lessons a secular parent can pass on to their child?, was “empathy” or “tolerance” (the most common was “critical thinking skills”). Though atheist parents embraced the values of competitive individualism and hoped to pass these on to their children, they were concerned that competitiveness, ambition, and individualism left unchecked could lead to selfishness, arrogance, and callousness. They hoped to mitigate these tendencies by stressing the importance of tolerance and empathy.

At a book club discussion, parents spent half an hour discussing the importance of nurturing empathy in their children. From my fieldnotes:

Rob: I think teaching [our kids] empathy is crucial.

Matt: What do you mean by empathy?

Rob: The ability to understand how someone else feels, which I think leads to caring how your actions affect others.
Danielle (Rob’s wife): I’m totally onboard with you on that one. What’s the point of being human without empathy? Might as well be [an animal]. I don’t want my kids acting like they’re better than everyone else.

Matt: Well, I just think empathy is human nature. Like “fight or flight.” You don’t need to teach something that’s instinct.

Rob: Yeah, but, come on, some people care more and some just don’t care at all. My wife teaches school and she sees a lot of bullies. Where’s their empathy?

Stephanie: Since [my daughter] is still just four years old, I will bring up some tragedy, like a flood, nothing too gruesome. I’ll say to her, “Isn’t that sad? Can you imagine how those people feel after losing their homes?” She gets it on her level. She’ll nod and say, “I bet they cried.”

This excerpt illustrates a number of points. First, most atheist parents saw the necessity of tempering negative consequences of competitive individualism (“bullies,” “might as well be an animal,” “don’t want my kid acting like their better than everyone”) with humanist values (“caring how your actions affect others,” “I bet they cried”). They wanted their children to become successful but morally balanced adults.

In interviews, other parents reported similar discussions. As Cathy told me, “I don’t hide the fact that there are homeless people from my son. He needs to know about suffering. Hiding it helps no one. He sees me give money to the homeless and treat them with respect.” Cathy and her husband Chris planned to involve their son in their community volunteering (Habitat for Humanity; a local soup kitchen). The discussions, role-modeling, and volunteer work were all strategies to nurture empathy.
Finally, Matt’s comment about empathy as instinct reflected a common retort to the accusation that without a morality founded on religion children could not learn to care for others. There was some consensus in the group that basic moral development—including development of empathy—was innate. This belief freed some atheist parents from having to worry about their children’s competitive individualism going too far. It also indicated yet another way in which atheist parents attempted to quash arrogance or intolerance in their children: by introducing moral ambiguity as a normal part of life.

**Moral Ambiguity**

The common accusations that atheists are moral relativists and that moral relativism necessarily implies an absence of a moral foundation, hit atheist parents particularly hard. Atheist parents rejected the idea that the moral socialization of children required imposing an inflexible set of rules. They responded in two ways to the charge that they were failing to teach their children proper rule-governed behavior: by emphasizing morality as a natural process, and by emphasizing the need to take context into account rather than robotically follow rules.

Sharon was one atheist parent who embraced a “morality as natural” ideology. “Teaching kids morality is not complicated. It doesn’t require the effort Christians make it out to take. If you want to be accepted by society, you’ll learn to do the right thing—to fit in.” Joe expressed a similar sentiment: “If you don’t treat other people like you want
to be [treated], you’ll be an outcast, you know? No friends, no one to love.” Emphasizing morality as a “natural social process” reinforced atheist parents’ objection to the religious indoctrination of children. At the secular parenting workshop, McGowan used Kohlberg’s (1958) theory of moral development as evidence for “morality as part of a natural social development.” A view of moral development as natural allowed some parents to side-step the question of how they would teach their kids to be moral.

Many atheist parents accused conventionally religious others of possessing simplistic moral codes that made facile distinctions between good and bad. They believed that some religious parents, particularly those they identified as “fundamentalist,” transmitted an inflexible moral code to their children through religious indoctrination, and that such a tightly defined code did not serve their children well. Atheist parents understood morality as relative, involving what many refer to as “gray areas.” Cathy, for example, looked forward to discussing moral complexities with her son:

> I think about showing him all of the opportunities, different choices, and points of view. I think it will be exciting to have these conversations where we ask big questions and debate. [Question: Do you mean as opposed to having one stance already decided for you by a religion?] (Her husband Chris nods his head in agreement.) Chris and I won’t always agree and [our son] will see that, which is healthy. We shouldn’t always agree on every issue.

Cathy’s husband agreed that good parenting entailed dialogue about religion, politics, and life choices. This couple wanted their son to understand that social issues are complex, and that sometimes even parents disagree. In three other couples, at least one
parent mentioned disagreeing openly with their partner in front of the children as a way to show that issues can have many legitimate sides and that people can disagree but still love and respect each other.

Atheist parents believed that moral relativism increased empathy for others. Paula wanted her child to appreciate the perspectives of others:

I want my child to have a sense of empathy. I want her to understand there isn't just one world. There is not [just] one way to live. Each of us chooses what's best for us with an understanding that, that is not what's best for everybody else. I think the hardest lesson to teach is that the world is not black and white, especially because young kids are so black and white, something is right or it's wrong. And unfortunately that's not true in the world.

Other atheists believed that children were vulnerable to the appeal of thinking in dichotomies. Children, they believed, were not yet able to grasp complex social issues. Many atheist parents thus felt it was important to encourage their children to outgrow the propensity to dichotomize.

Teaching kids to live with moral ambiguity was the opposite of what atheist parents thought fundamentalist religious parents taught their children. As Linda remarked:

Some Christians are teaching kids there's only one way to be. That cannot be easy; telling your kids things are one way when everything else in the world is showing them otherwise. Like with marriage, teaching kids a man and a woman get married, fall in love, have kids and live happily ever after. Oh, really? Because it's only like 30% of the time now.
Linda, and other atheists, saw conventionally religious parents as poorly equipping their children to deal with a complex and diverse social world. Moreover, atheist parents saw mainstream religious parents as promoting dishonesty in the name of religious ideology. In contrast, they saw moral relativism as offering a more honest view of the world. Atheist parents held that teaching kids to think and live past moral absolutes was a key strength of secular parenting. Atheist parents wanted their kids to be able to deal with “gray areas” and recognize the complexity of moral issues. They hoped that by encouraging empathy via moral relativism, they could counter any selfishness, arrogance, or intolerance that came along with competitive individualism.

**MAGICAL SOCIALIZATION**

Most Pagan parents vehemently objected to raising children within a specific spiritual or religious tradition. They did, however, try to teach their children to see the world as enchanted; that is, as suffused with many invisible powers and subject to magical influence. Though Pagans generally abhorred the practice of indoctrinating children, they taught their children to believe in the power of magic and in an enchanted world where things are not as they appear on the surface.

Max Weber used the concept of the “disenchantment” of society to describe the fall of the ancient cosmological traditions. For Weber, this referred to the transition from magical ways of understanding the world to scientific ways. Rationalization, in Weber’s view, displaced mystery and awe. Pagans oppose this rationalization and seek
ways to re-enchant the material world through pursuit of “the old ways” and magical traditions. The Pagan parents I studied wanted to share with their children the joys of living in an enchanted world.

Pagan parents employed three strategies to impart this worldview to their children. First, they anthropomorphized nature and inanimate objects. Second, they actively encouraged children’s magic play. Finally, they encouraged kids to connect with and revere intuition as divine knowledge. These strategies allowed Pagan parents to insist that children should never be indoctrinated, despite transmitting their belief in an enchanted world.

**Anthropomorphizing**

Many Pagans believe that all things organic and inorganic possess a soul. Anthropomorphizing in front of children was a way parents could convey an enchanted, transcendental worldview to their children, while avoiding explicit indoctrination.

Sandy, mother of three children, was raising her three children outside of religion. However, she and her husband Joel openly shared their animist beliefs with their children on a daily basis:

I don’t push my beliefs on my kids but they definitely know what I believe. They understand my huge rock collection isn’t just rocks. (I ask her to explain.) I’m not entirely Wiccan. If I had to name my beliefs it would be animism. Rocks are not merely rocks. I clearly remember how much

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References to “the old ways” and of “magical tradition” abound in Pagan vernacular. Given the relatively recent birth of Neo-Paganism, we must understand such language not merely as descriptive but as legitimating. In using such language, Pagans attempt to connect their Neo-Paganism to pre-Christian Paganism.
wood went into building our house and being very sad for the trees and the kids knew it. Everything has a soul; even rocks and trees. I don’t hide this [belief] from them.

In acting toward her rock collection as a collection of souls rather than inanimate objects, and mourning the loss of (tree) souls in the building of the family home, she taught her children a lesson about alternate realities. Her husband helped, too. In a separate interview Joel told me he openly shared his animism with his three children: “I’ve never had a sit-down religious talk with them. It just comes up sometimes. Like, I’ll say I’m going to go for a walk to talk to a plant.” While neither Sandy nor Joel expressly inculcated animism in their children, they conveyed their beliefs by example.

Sandy and Joel, like other Pagan parents, believed that their children had to discover their predestined spiritual paths. Pagan parents seemed genuine in their desire for their children to eventually do what felt best for them in terms of spirituality. Pagan parents nonetheless expressed hope that their children would discover and embrace values associated with Paganism, such as belief in transcendence over the (material) mundane, the power of magic, and the pursuit of authentic spirituality.

Pagan children were also exposed to anthropomorphizing by adults in group gatherings. Beth and Rosa, organizers of the children’s program at a Pagan gathering, sought to include broadly held Pagan practices and beliefs in the curriculum. As part of

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10 This genuineness stood in stark contrast to their atheist parenting peers, a difference that will be explained in detail later in the chapter.
this curriculum, they taught kids how to uncover and recreate images of their “power animals” in the form of masks:

Rosa: Today we will be honoring Native Americans. We will be making power animal masks. Do you all know what a power animal is?

Ally (10-year-old girl): It’s an animal that really (“really” repeated 9 times) is in you, is most like you.

Rosa: Traditionally it’s an animal like an elephant. What is your power animal Ally?

Ally: Mine’s a hippo. Every time I see one I get really happy. When I can’t sleep I hug my power animal. And they’re lazy like me but nobody cares that they’re lazy.

Rosa: Yes, power animals can be great spirit-guides.

After Ally chimed in, others followed. One boy enthusiastically identified his power animal immediately as an eagle, another reluctantly claimed the ant, and another chose a dragon after some deliberation. Through this exercise, Pagan leaders encouraged children to see parallels between humans and other animals, and to do so through creative expression (mask making). In anthropomorphizing their spirit animal, children of Pagans were expected to see beyond mundane reality and access an enchanted world. In this enchanted world, a critical bond existed between human and animal, with animal protecting and assisting their human in daily activities.

At the same Pagan gathering, a self-proclaimed crone told a group of children of how she had once taken a fallen tree branch to a river to release its spirit. While telling this story, she claimed to have encountered a nasty wood sprite that nearly attacked
her. The children were enthralled. The idea that a common tree branch held life and value seemed particularly appealing. Alone and in groups, Pagan parents and community leaders incorporated anthropomorphizing into their interactions with children. This exposed children of Pagans to the idea that reality is not always what it appears to be to conventional others, priming them for acceptance of magic.

**Magic Play**

Most Pagan parents disagreed with the idea of raising their children Pagan. However, they actively encouraged kids to find wonder in the idea of a magical world, specifically in their ability to wield magic. Of course, Pagan parents did not have to reach far to incorporate magic play\(^{11}\) into their children’s lives. Magic play, whether consisting of reading fairy tales or enacting rituals associated with myths like Santa Claus, are already heavily incorporated into mainstream culture. As even their atheist counterparts pointed out, young kids seem particularly drawn to the idea of magic and to magic play.

Some Pagan parents incorporated Pagan magic into mainstream magic beliefs. Here is how Barbara injected novel Pagan elements into her family’s celebration of Christmas:

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\(^{11}\) By using the term “magic play” I do not intend to belittle the intent behind the socialization strategy. Without doubt, the majority of Pagan parents believed their child’s “magic play” to be either magic work itself or a precursor to eventual magic work. I refer to “magic play” in this section as it is used more generically outside of ritual and as I observed it, more for play than serious attempts at wielding magic. The question of the validity of claims to magic work is irrelevant for purposes of my analysis here.
I went gung ho on holidays. My husband loves Santa but that’s his thing. I wanted something that had the sheen of my belief. So I started to celebrate solstice. I wanted something on par with Santa that had Pagan flavoring so the kids could understand my beliefs. So, I created “Lady Night.” She visits every night from December 20th-26th. She gives Pagan presents. The 21st, we call solstice. That’s our big day where we celebrate with lights and gifts. Christmas Eve we do solstice but we put cookies and carrot out for Santa and Rudolph. The next day we wrap up solstice with the story of how [Lady Night] came to do this. The kids love it.

Barbara recognized the potential of using mainstream notions of magic to share her Pagan beliefs with her children. In creating “Lady Night,” she used common symbolic forms: a magical figurehead (Lady Night), rituals, holy days, and an origin story. She did not need to invent the concept of magic for her kids. She simply piggybacked on Christmas.

Pagan parents also encouraged children’s belief in fairies, including step-mother Becky:

My stepdaughter Ashley is like her Catholic mother, understanding God as the dude on the cloud. But she and her sister will feed the fairies. I take my bag of Skittles and throw them in the yard and the girls ask, “What are you doing?” [I say], “Feeding the fairies.” “Cool, can we help? Where do the fairies live?” [I explain], “Everywhere.” “Can you see ‘em?” [Answering], “Sometimes.”

In encouraging magic play through feeding fairies, Becky introduced an enchanted worldview that differed from the type of transcendentalism implied in Ashley’s (biological) mother’s Catholicism. An examination of the appeal of fairies and magic is beyond the scope of this analysis. However, it was clear that children of Pagans, like
other children, enthusiastically embraced this particular type of magic. What was different for children of Pagans was the incorporation of magic into the everyday. Kids of Pagans were encouraged to make magic central to their play.

As was the case with anthropomorphizing, encouraging magic play took on a different meaning when done in a group. Pagan organizers encouraged children to play, incorporating magic as a theme. When observing the children’s program at Southern Pagan Living (SPL), I discovered magic even in names:

One girl has “Garnet” written on her name tag. Her friend calls her Sydney. Later on I discover Garnet refers to her “magic name.” She announces it to the others, telling everyone she chose her name because it corresponds to her favorite magic gem. After hearing this, Taylor points to her name tag, “Lyra,” which she explains is her magic name. Both of the leaders and the kids use magic names with one another.

The two leaders reinforced the use of magic names, symbolic in Paganism of the separation of the mundane world from the transcendent world. The use of magic names was enticing to kids. They seemed empowered by these special identity markers.

Two mothers I interviewed had organized local social groups for children of Pagans. These mothers went beyond other Pagan parents by engaging kids explicitly in magic work, rather than just magic play.\(^\text{12}\) Clarissa, mother of five, said, “We try to have fun doing magic. If a friend is sick, we do a candle spell. We made wands and a pentagram necklace. Their favorite rituals were making equinox cakes. On the outside you put 24 candles, 12 dark and 12 light.” Making wands and necklaces was not just

\(^\text{12}\) “Magic work” specifically refers to the wielding of magic in ritual, whereas “magic play” can incorporate magic work or can just refer to thematic imaginary play.
arts-and-crafts activity. It was also a lesson in how to wield power and ward off evil.
The baking of the cake served the dual purpose of enjoyment of sweets and a lesson in
the Pagan philosophy of the inherent good and evil in all people (and in magic), as
represented by equal numbers of light and dark candles.

Teaching Kids to Rely on Intuition

Pagan parents also conveyed an enchanted worldview to their children by
nurturing and validating intuition as divine knowledge. Intuition, often viewed in the
mainstream as a matter of instinct or attuned perception, held a different meaning for
Pagans. In the Pagan community, intuition was seen as knowledge flowing from divine
sources to humans. The source might be the gods or divine natural spirits, depending
on individual interpretation.

Through participant observation I learned how highly Pagans value intuition. At
my first Pagan group meeting, the organizer sprang up mid-conversation and brought
me two books on Wicca. She told me not to stop and think but to run my hands over
both books, describing to the group what I felt. Confused, I asked for clarification. She
responded, “You’ll feel immediately drawn to one or want to jerk your hand away from
another.” The other women present urged me on. This procedure was meant to reveal
to me which branch of Wicca—Gardnerian or Dianic—was my predestined path.¹³

¹³ Though I explained my presence as a researcher to the Pagan group multiple times, many Pagans insisted on
viewing (and interacting with) me as a potential Pagan.
An eclectic Pagan, Garrett brought his four-year-old son Ben to a Pagan meeting. Bored, Ben walked over to me and began playing with my necklace made of the crystal hematite. After assuring Garrett that I didn’t mind, he explained, “Ben likes hematite, a grounding energy. He’s drawn to it because it soothes him and he is hyper.” The other women nodded in agreement. Tori added, “I surround myself with rose quartz. I stumbled on it at a festival and just knew the goddess needed me to find unconditional love.” Though Ben may be too young to understand his father’s explanation, by employing this type of account for his son’s behavior, Garrett encourages his son and others to view Ben’s behavior as a response to intuition. In this instance, he replaces a mundane account, such as “Ben is playing because he is bored,” with an account that vaunts intuition.

As Rosa, a children’s program organizer, said to me, “Our kids are different from others because they are taught to trust their intuition.” When asked what intuition was, another Pagan parent simply responded, “The will of the Goddess.” While most Pagan parents did not explicitly connect intuition with divinity, it was clearly treated as special. Accounts of intuition often cited the influence of magic and connection to past lives.

Pagans believe that children are born creative and expressive, and are innately attuned to the divine in ways that most adults are not. Roxanne (Wiccan) understood this belief when she said:

Just ask a two- or three-year-old, preferably before the age of four—before they’ve gone to school. Ask them questions
about their past lives. It’s amazing! It works! They can tap in. They’ll start telling you crazy details about where they lived, what they did. Of course, once adults hear this stuff, they tell kids, “Don’t be silly.” Or call them liars. Eventually, they just forget their past, like it never happened.

According to some Pagans, recalling past lives operates through divine intuition (“They can tap in!”). Pagans encouraged kids to explore and rely on intuition as a legitimate and often superior form of knowledge. Through these combined efforts to expose children to an enchanted, alternative worldview, Pagan parents could uphold their belief in allowing children to choose their own faith, while nudging them in the direction of alternative spirituality.

CREATIVE INDIVIDUALISM

Whereas atheists sought to instill competitive individualism in their children, Pagans sought to instill what I refer to as “creative individualism” in their children. Creative individualism is the view that personal success is based on one’s ability to achieve authenticity in thought and self-expression, as free from societal expectations and dogmatic principles as possible. In this view, spiritual authenticity and personal creativity are the hallmarks of success. Pagan parents thus emphasized to their children the values of creativity, dogma-free spirituality, and self-awareness.

Pagan parents used two strategies to transmit values of creative individualism to their children. They emphasized creativity and nonconformity as the vehicles that would provide kids with spiritual authenticity as adults. They also imparted belief that
purpose and meaning in life are possible only through authentic spirituality, uncompromised by preconceived notions of what spirituality should or should not be. By passing on these philosophies, Pagan parents hoped to encourage their children to explore all of life’s options and carve out a unique path for themselves, providing their lives meaning beyond the mundane existence of working-class life, the strictures of organized religion, and what they saw as the cold rationality of secularism.

The Value of Creativity and Nonconformity

Classic research on the transmission of values (e.g., Kohn 1969) suggests that the working-class Pagan parents would be likely to inculcate values of conformity and respect for authority in their children. Subsequent sociological research on social class and family parenting styles has corroborated Kohn’s findings (e.g., Lareau 2003; Rubin 1996). Yet the Pagan parents I studied did not fit this pattern. Social class seemed to be a less powerful determinant of their parenting style than their Pagan beliefs.

Rather than emphasize obedience and conformity, Pagans overwhelmingly encouraged children to express individuality, nearly unbounded by social mores. For example, unlike their atheist peers (and many other parents) who compartmentalize children’s play time from work time, Pagan parents did not appear to validate those boundaries. They generally defended the right (sometimes even the need) for children to explore imagination with minimal limits.¹⁴ For example, when children were creating

¹⁴ Pagan parents were quick to clarify that while they encouraged their children to do what felt right when exploring imagination, they authoritatively upheld rigid rules regarding physical safety.
power animal masks at a Pagan gathering, one boy stood up and walked away from the
group, announcing to no one in particular, “I need to drum now.” He picked up a drum
and started beating it. Co-organizer Beth smiled at him and asked, “How did you know
we needed drumming to inspire our Native-American craftwork?” Though he continued
drumming erratically, in a manner I interpreted as disruptive, Rosa also encouraged
him saying, “If you feel you need to drum now, then that is exactly what you need to do.”

As High Priestess Kristen confirmed, “Diversity is the stamp of our individuality,
and that’s what makes our Pagan community. We’ve got a lot of chiefs. Our kids are not
taught to blindly follow.” In referring to the Pagan community as consisting of “a lot of
chiefs,” Kristen reinforced the value of creative individualism. In parenting, Pagans
preferred their children learn to create their own standards of thought and behavior.
They understood that nonconformity would occasionally place their children at odds
with other authority figures. Yet they generally believed it was worth whatever cost
their kids might have to pay in the end.

Becky, stepmother to two daughters, defended one stepdaughter’s right to
explore magic belief, even though the girl’s biological mother objected.

Lisa’s doing the [magic] wands and the force fields and her
mom’s like, “She’s a freak!” But we all knew kids like that.
Sometimes we hung out with them and sometimes we
didn’t but that kid has just as much purpose in this world as
anybody else. Why change them? She is what she needs to
be at the moment.

Becky understood Lisa’s actions as non-normative and therefore capable of alienating
her from others, but she expressed strong support for her use of magic play as a means
to achieve authenticity. She valued Lisa’s creativity and her nonconformity. According to Becky’s perception, her acceptance of Lisa’s nonconformity stood in opposition to Lisa’s Catholic mother.

Becky went further in encouraging Lisa’s exploration of magic. She gave both of her daughters rose quartz crystals that supposedly contained magical energy. When the girls’ biological mother confiscated the crystals, Becky was upset:

I get really upset about her parenting. (As if speaking to Lisa’s biological mother) “Let the crystals mean whatever it means to them. Projecting what you think it means is weird. They’re not you. They’re completely autonomous little people!” You have an incredible amount of influence and your goal as a parent is to steer them in the right direction, but they’re not you. And it’s okay they’re not you. Thank goodness because the world already has you. We need something different.

Becky saw Lisa’s mother’s demands of conformity as stifling the girls’ creativity, authenticity, and individuality. This was in direct contradiction to the value of creative individualism.

Pagans believed that children should not be forced to accept their parents’ interpretation of reality as the only legitimate interpretation. To Pagans, this was bad parenting. The role of parents, in the Pagan view, is to guide children toward self-discovery and finding their own path through life. This process requires that children push the bounds of normative thinking and behavior.
Authentic Spirituality

Pagan parents encouraged their children to explore religions of all kinds and to seek spirituality by creating a transcendental paradigm uniquely suited to them. Ideally, they hoped their children would pursue spirituality as unfettered by societal (and even parental) expectations as possible. This meant many Pagan parents tried to insulate their children from pressures to conform to mainstream religions. To many Pagan parents, the religious label a child adopted in the end was far less important than the child’s pursuit of authentic spirituality.

Because the pursuit of authentic spirituality was so important, Pagan parents expressed little anxiety when their children explored religions or philosophies outside of their own—as long as exploration appeared to be motivated by curiosity rather than by a desire to conform. For example, Pagan parents spoke of allowing their kids to attend religious services with others. They expressed few qualms about this hurting their children. In fact, many encouraged their children to explore multiple spiritual options.

Pagan parents promoted creative individualism by encouraging children to look into many religions and even assemble pieces from multiple faiths to create their own spirituality.¹⁵ Most of the Pagan parents I met eschewed strict categorization of their identity, preferring to emphasize their religion or spirituality as “cobbled together,”

¹⁵ The label “eclectic Pagan” was the most common and possibly the most esteemed label Pagans assigned themselves. According to the logic of creative individualism, the eclectic Pagan is a person who refuses to conform to institutional labels. Rather, the eclectic Pagan sees through the rigid demarcations of institutionalized religions and instead chooses to craft an original—authentic—spirituality.
“eclectic,” “taking the good from lots of religions and throwing away what I don’t like about them,” “a combination of Paganisms that work for me,” or something to similar effect. Barbara, an “eclectic Wiccan” mother to an eight-year-old son and a sixteen-year-old daughter explained her attitude towards her children’s pursuit of religion:

I’m the kind of parent that wants my kids to choose their own paths. If they hear about Christianity and think it’s cool and want to go to a regular church then more power to them, you know. If they think it would be cooler to be Jewish or Hindu or Buddhist or a combination of these, that’s great! I try to make sure that they have materials, whatever they need in order to learn about things that they want to learn about. So, they’ve gone to different churches with people.

Pagan parents held a child’s freedom to choose a religion (or create their own) in high regard. Though they often criticized mainstream religions, especially Christianity, their belief that children should be free to pursue any spiritual path seemingly overrode these reservations.

Mercer, Norse Pagan father to a toddler son, explained to me how he and his Strega (Italian Witchcraft) wife Abby planned to approach their son’s exposure to religions. With a hint of mild concern, Mercer informed me that his son had already been exposed to Christianity at public school. He worried that his son might opt out of spiritual exploration in favor of adopting the Christianity of his peers:

Soon we’ll explain to him that not everybody believes [in Christianity] like they do here in the South. I’ll tell him, “You need to make a decision about what you want in life.” We’re going to feed him information about any religion that he wants to know about. Because it is wrong for us to try to force religion down somebody’s throat. That goes for our
It is not just you that I can’t force it down your throat; it is him that I cannot force it down his throat either. So if he wants to learn about Buddhism he will learn about it. If he wants to learn about Muslims he will learn about Muslims. I don’t care what religion my son chooses as long as it calls to him.

Mercer, like many Pagan parents, opposed the indoctrination of children. Like other parents, he claimed to care little what religion his son embraced later in life, but he did care about the disproportionate influence of hegemonic Christianism. This influence, as many Pagans saw it, could threaten a child’s ability to “uncover their authentic spiritual path.”

Sandy and Joel typified the Pagan parent handling of religious exploration. In separate interviews, they told me their eldest son Mikhail had explored Baptist Christianity, Satanism, and atheism. Both parents seemed to support his explorations. Even when Mikhail identified as Satanist—a stigmatized spiritual path even among highly-tolerant Pagans—Joel and Sandy claimed to hold steady in their convictions of his right to pursue any path. Joel explained:

When Mikhail was little he went to Baptist church for a while. Then when he was 14, a Satanist. Now he says he’s an atheist. [Question: Where do you think he got the idea of Satanism from?] Sandy and I have been very open about discussing anything. So, he could have gotten it from anywhere. I don’t know. I never really asked him those kinds of questions. I just liked to hear him talk about what it meant to him. I had already read the book [on Satanism]

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16 Note that many Pagan parents held seemingly contradictory notions about authentic spirituality. On one hand, they viewed authentic spirituality as predestined through divinity. Yet, on the other hand, they seemed to hold belief that predestined authentic spirituality could be quashed through Christian hegemony. Contradiction in belief is not unique to Paganism. I point it out here to underscore how inconsistencies in theology can sometimes compound parenting decisions.
that he wanted. So we bought it for him. I didn't really think anything about it because ... when he said Satanism I was like what do you mean? (Joel's tone is that of mild interest but no concern) I wasn't like, "Oh my god!" I was just curious. Like if he had said he was a Buddhist I probably would have thought the same thing. Like what do you mean by that?

[Question: Now he is leaning towards identifying with atheism?] Yeah, I think... he is just looking for a way to be, to live. So, you know, he is just testing the world. He is testing out his theories to see what he comes up with—what speaks to him.

Joel and Sandy viewed their son's interest in Satanism much as they did his exploration of Baptist Christianity: as a healthy pursuit of creative individualism and authentic spirituality. Pagan parents were not naïve, however, about the problems their child's pursuit of creative individualism could engender. They took some steps to minimize any negative consequences inherent in pursuing creative individualism.

**TEMPERING CREATIVE INDIVIDUALISM**

Pagan parents' emphasis on creative individualism sometimes led their children to challenge authority figures, such as teachers, who prefer obedience and conformity (especially from working-class children; see Rubin 1994; Lareau 2003; Garey 1999). Pagan parents also feared that creative individualism could place their children in jeopardy with peers and social workers who might feel threatened. Finally, because of their working-class status, Pagan parents often faced economic insecurity and instability. One result of this instability was Pagans' emphasis on self-reliance, skills for
coping with economic hardship, and a willingness to accept compromise. Yet these same conditions also led Pagan parents to emphasize the importance of self-expression, finding meaning outside of work, and of transcending mundane economic concerns.

Pagan parents thus sought ways to equip their children to deal with the economic realities of working-class life, without compromising their spiritual growth. This effort was informed by concern that if a child were to pursue creative individualism with few limits, s/he could become selfish, dangerous, or alienated from society. Pagan parents attempted to temper any negative effects by instilling in their children an accountability measure that would force them to consider how their actions affected others, while simultaneously reminding them of their place in society.

Pagans relied on their own version of the Golden Rule to teach their children accountability and responsibility. For many Pagans, this Golden Rule is institutionalized within the “Wiccan Rede” (often referred to merely as “the Rede”), a statement that provides the key moral system in the Neo-pagan religion of Wicca and other related Witchcraft-based faiths. The Wiccan Rede espouses the closest thing to a dogmatic principle in Wicca that exists. The most common form of the Rede being, “An it harm none, do what ye will.” This statement was used by Pagan parents to remind their children to keep the welfare of others in mind in all actions.17 Though somewhat

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17 Though the Wiccan Rede is meant to be a statement of moral code that shapes one’s behaviors in all aspects of life, it is most commonly associated with morality implicit in the practice of magic.
controversial within the Pagan community, many Pagans, including the majority who self-identified as Pagan but non-Wiccan, held the Wiccan Rede in high esteem.

Most Pagans believed the Rede to be a useful guide for human behavior. This belief carried over into parenting where exploration of ideas, expression of individual creativity, and acceptance of others who behave/believe differently was generally encouraged, but always within limits. Samantha describes how she uses the Wiccan Rede:

If [my daughter] grows up and wants to believe in God, I'll take her to church. Whatever. That's her thing. That's her right to believe in whatever. As long as she's not hurting anybody, you know [she follows] the Wiccan Rede, I don't care. She knows the Rede.

The Wiccan Rede appeared to function on three levels. It was first of all a gauge by which Pagans could hold themselves and their children accountable for the consequences of their actions. It also demonstrated that Pagans, like conventional others, stood by a shared moral code. Finally, embedded in use of the Wiccan Rede is reinforcement of belief in the power of magic—magic so strong it requires a codified standard of accountability.

Some Pagans further incorporate a Wiccan principle referred to as “The Rule of Three” into their moral code. The Rule of Three (also Three-fold Law or Law of Return) says that whatever energy a person puts out into the world, be it positive or negative,

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18 The controversy surrounding acceptance of the Wiccan Rede as a general statement of Pagan morality is complex and multi-pronged. However, the most commonly cited objection centered on the general disdain for anything approaching dogma or institutionalized mechanisms of social control. However, the parents I studied, while aware of the controversies, generally agreed upon the utility of the Wiccan Rede and admitted to shaping their lives around it.
will be returned to that person three times over. Pagans often conflated the Wiccan Rede with the Rule of Three, as both refer to moral concern for how one’s actions affect others. Janice specifically evoked the Rede and the Rule of Three in her parenting:

[Question: What do you think are the most important lessons a Pagan parent can teach their child?] It is really about just taking responsibility for your actions. You know, if you cause someone else pain it will come back threefold. I believe that if you are kind to somebody that comes back too. I tell my kids, “Just know upfront that whatever your actions caused, you have to deal with that issue.”

The Rule of Three involves a karmic aspect. Some Pagans chose not to focus on that part of it and instead read it as a secular Golden Rule. But other Pagan parents, like Janice, passed on to their kids the belief that if you hurt others, you will be punished. Because of this, the Rede can be seen as more focused on controlling behavior than on prescribing what is ethically right.

Pagan parents, like atheists, were well aware that conventionally religious others saw them as deficient moral educators of children. Fearing accusations of the maleficence embedded in Pagans’ use of magic and uninhibited expressions of creative individualism, Pagans relied on a karmic-like Golden Rule in shaping their children’s morality. Through the Wiccan Rede and The Rule of Three, Pagan parents found a commonly accepted moral foundation by which to steer their children’s morality, while avoiding the constraints of dogmatic principles they believed to be inherent in

\[19\] The “Rule of Three” is sometimes described as karma by Wiccans. However, this is not strictly accurate. Both concepts describe the process of cause and effect and often encourage the individual to act in a good way. But the concept of karma, according to the scriptures of Buddhism, Hinduism and other eastern belief systems, does not predict three-fold return. Furthermore, such belief systems do not contain the same concepts of good and evil that Wicca does. (www.wikipedia.org)
institutionalized religions. Consistent with their values of tolerance and empathy, they did not compel their children to embrace Paganism. Rather, they believed exposing their children to an enchanted worldview would enable their children to construct ethical lives without the confining strictures of mainstream religious doctrines or of cold scientific rationality.

COMPARING ATHEIST AND PAGAN PARENTS

In this section I consider how atheist and Pagan parents’ experiences overlap and diverge. Both groups of parents socialize their children to value individualism, and both worry that the Christian hegemony of the U.S. Bible Belt South will impede their child’s intellectual and/or spiritual growth. However, their different levels of financial and cultural resources led them to embrace different parenting goals and strategies.

Middle- and upper-middle class atheist parents could choose where their children were educated, what curriculum was emphasized, and what values teachers and other authority figures emphasized in their interactions with children. Many sent their children to Montessori schools. Others (40%) planned to or were already homeschooling their children. This was due to concern that public schools were incapable of serving children’s individual needs. Their motivation for avoiding reliance
on public schools fit a general emphasis on individualism over collectivism but also reflects their privileged social class status.\textsuperscript{20}

Atheist parents’ preference for opting their children out of public school was a luxury almost none of their Pagan counterparts could afford. Atheist parents rarely recognized this as a form of privilege. One atheist parent framed the decision to homeschool their child this way:

\textit{For me, being a parent means that I need to make sure I am providing my child with the best resources possible and that’s just not public school to me. [Public school] just doesn’t cut it. So I decided to homeschool [my daughter].}

In this account, and others like it, atheist parents routinely overlooked the role social class resources played in expanding their parenting choices. Rather, they characterized their parenting as a reflection of individually-derived concerns and preferences. While Pagan parents also expressed concerns over a one-size-fits-all approach in public schools, most accepted the fact that their children would be or were already attending public school. The two Pagan mothers who homeschooled their children were the two who possessed middle-class resources.

Atheists and Pagans also enjoyed, so to speak, different levels of cultural acceptance. Combined with differing levels of socioeconomic resources, this led to other differences in parenting experiences. One difference was that Pagans experienced more resistance from their kids regarding their beliefs than did atheist parents. As Joel, a

\textsuperscript{20} It was very common for atheist parents to gripe about the failure of the public school system to teach kids basic and higher-level learning skills. Only two atheist parents remained vocal advocates of the public school system. They were both public school teachers.
Pagan father, told me, "Now that she’s older, my daughter makes fun of [my beliefs]. She never asks, “Why do you believe that?” She’ll say, "I can't believe you think rocks are alive. That is so stupid!” At Camp Quest I met twelve-year-old Adrienne. Over dinner she complained to me about her mother’s Pagan beliefs: “My mom’s a witch. It’s ridiculous. [According to her] everything’s divine. Seriously! She believes a doorknob is divine.”21

Since Pagan beliefs are given little credence in the broader society, and because Pagans allowed their children freedom of religious expression, they were more likely to have their beliefs questioned by their children. It is important to understand, however, that resistance can vary over time. The kids who questioned their parents’ Pagan beliefs at the time of my research were adolescents, perhaps striving for independence from their parents. I also learned of three cases in which kids seemingly rejected their Pagan parents’ beliefs but later came to identify as Pagan. Nonetheless, Pagans were more likely to have to contend with their children’s resistance than atheists.

For the most part, kids of atheists did not resist their parents’ secularism. The struggle Allison and Vince had with their daughter who insisted on thanking Jesus for everything before dinner was one exception. Allison specifically blamed this on the two years her daughter spent in a “fundamentalist Christian daycare” while Allison was a single mother. The other exception was Diane and her teenage daughter, who identified as Christian. Diane shared custody of her daughter with her ex-husband and his new

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21 Though the camp was touted as a secular humanist camp, a couple of the children in attendance had parents who identified as Pagan.
wife. She blamed her daughter’s infatuation with Christianity on the step-mother, who “had the whole family attending church for a couple of years.” In atheist families where both parents shared similar views, kids were unlikely to resist. In the cases of the single mother and the blended family, children were swayed by competing ideologies.

CONCLUSION

The atheist and Pagan parents I studied experienced the burden of Christian hegemony in the Bible Belt South. Pagan parents were acutely aware of the bias against them in social service agencies and court systems. Even the affluent atheist parents experienced what Edgell et al. (2006) documented as a stubborn divide between believers and non-believers in the United States. Both groups of parents clearly experienced parenting challenges that arose because of their religious marginality.

The types of parenting strategies atheists and Pagans employed revealed what these parents considered to be the most important values parents can pass on to their children. For atheists and Pagans, good parenting requires teaching children critical thinking skills and creative risk-taking, respectively. The top value atheist parents hoped to pass on to their children was the value of thinking critically about the world. For Pagans, the top value was striving for authentic spirituality. Atheist parents thus immersed their children in science, guided them away from superstition, and discouraged belief without evidence. Pagan parents immersed their children in magic
and promoted intuition as a legitimate form of knowledge. Taken together, these parenting strategies nurtured critical thinking and creative risk-taking.

Both groups of parents adamantly opposed indoctrination, but they did so for different reasons. Atheists thought indoctrination of children would render them vulnerable to blindly following in others’ footsteps. Pagans opposed indoctrination on the grounds that each individual must pursue authentic spirituality as unfettered by pressure from others as possible. Both groups saw mainstream religion as operating on an indoctrination model, and thus took steps as parents to inoculate their children against this harm.

In a culture where no particular religion, worldview, or life philosophy dominated others, these parents likely would have socialized their children differently. However, this was not the case for atheists and Pagans raising children in the Bible Belt South. Parenting in this context required a balancing act. Parents sought to steer their children clear of mainstream religion without courting visibility and possible discrimination. This was not easy. Atheist and Pagan parents settled on the strategies they found most useful, given the resources (social, financial, and cultural) that they had at their disposal.

Part of analyzing context in parenting includes recognizing how parenting values and styles are related to cultural, economic, and human capital. Sociologists have long documented the influence that social class has on both parenting values and parenting styles (Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003; Hays 1996; Nelson 2010; Rubin 1976, 1994). Based on
prior research, one would expect upper-middle-class atheist parents to devote vast resources to cultivating the potential of their children, encouraging them to develop an internal locus of control, high aspirations, and a sense of ease when interacting with authority figures. The same studies would predict that poor and working-class Pagan parents will use a more authoritarian style of parenting, encouraging their children to conform and obey. My research complicates the story.

Atheist parents fit the expected pattern. Pagan parents did not. It seems that Paganism and the values associated with Paganism were greater influences on parenting values and styles than social class. For Pagans, survival of the soul trumps survival of the paycheck. This belief manifests itself in their approach to socialization of children. Teaching their children to transcend the mundane realities of working-class life through imagination and spirituality is “good parenting” to the Pagan parents I met. This finding is one that should stand as a reminder to family sociologists that even long-established patterns can be upended under unusual conditions.

In the next chapter, I will examine how atheist and Pagan parents dealt with a common infringement on their parenting. In particular, some Christian family members continued to proselytize to atheists and Pagans even after being told to stop and agreeing to stop. I will analyze what happens when atheist and Pagan parents attempt to erect boundaries to stop or minimize unwelcomed proselytizing by loved ones.
Atheist and Pagan parents in the Bible Belt South learn to make sense of their identities as parents in a context where their beliefs are routinely devalued. As examined in previous chapters, atheist and Pagan parents maintain a moral identity of “good parent” through defensive othering strategies. They also attempt to shape their children’s worldviews and ensure their moral foundation through socialization strategies that reflect the valuation of their marginalized beliefs. Throughout the last two chapters, I have argued that atheist and Pagan parents struggle with hegemonic Christianity, by which they feel judged—and subsequently condemned—as parents.

In this chapter I examine how atheist and Pagan parents coped with one of the most painful experiences they faced as parents: unwelcomed proselytizing by some Christian family members. This was a major concern for atheist parents. For Pagans, the issue also emerged as problematic, though in a far less urgent manner. The strategies atheists and Pagans employed in dealing with proselytizing strangers, acquaintances, and co-workers (e.g., “I just tell them I’m not interested and close the door,” “I say I’m not really religious,” “I really get in their face about it”) did not work with family members. Becoming a parent exacerbated the need for atheist and Pagan

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22 Proselytizing is not exclusive to certain Christian denominations. However, in this study parents complained about proselytizing only by Christian family members.
parents to determine what level of proselytizing they were willing to allow in family members’ interactions with their children.

Parents assessed the risk posed by family members’ proselytizing. Those who saw a risk of negative consequences tried to control the interactions proselytizing family members had with their children. Parents who saw little risk did not feel compelled to mediate relationships between children and proselytizing family members. In general, atheist parents expressed far greater concern than Pagans over potential harm in allowing Christian family members to proselytize to their children.

In this chapter I document the physical and ideological boundaries parents erected to protect their children from Christian family members’ proselytizing. I argue that both atheist and Pagan parents’ internalized Christian hegemony and, as a result, only weakly resisted Christian family members’ attempts to proselytize. As I will show, parents dealt with their relative powerlessness by changing their perspective, rather than resisting more vigorously. Their solution, in short, was to invent family myths to downplay the threat of meddling family members. These myths also served an emotion management function, allowing atheist and Pagan parents to more comfortably bear the inequality they could not escape.

PROSELYTIZING FAMILY MEMBERS

Not all atheist or Pagan parents had family members that proselytized. However, some level of proselytizing by family members was discussed by over three-quarters of
interviewees (33 out of 40). Of those, about half said proselytizing by family members was a problem. Some viewed this proselytizing as mere irritation. Others found it so upsetting that they cried while talking about it. It was, at the very least, an unwelcome complication in the lives of many parents in my study.

Proselytizing took various forms: silently leaving religious pamphlets at parents' houses; inviting parents and children to attend special church activities; asking permission from parents to bring children to church; directly inviting children to attend weekly church or summer Bible camp; lecturing parents on moral dangers of parenting outside of Christianity; purchasing mainstream religious objects for children for special occasions—against parents' wishes; pressuring parents to baptize a child; demanding Christian prayers be recited at atheists’ or Pagans’ homes; using babysitting time to speak to children about Christianity; using babysitting time to take children to church without parental permission; telling children that parents are going to hell for lack of (correct) beliefs; informing children of beliefs in heaven and/or hell behind a parent's back; and secretly baptizing a child without telling the parents. Even this is not an exhaustive list.

Proselytizers shared their religion within their own homes and sometimes tried to force it into the homes of others. Some proselytizing was aimed at parents; in other cases proselytizing family members appealed directly to children, either in front of parents or behind their backs. Some proselytizing was perceived by atheists and Pagans as harmless or positive, while other acts were more disturbing. For purposes of this
study, I define all of these acts, major and minor, as “proselytizing.” They all involved Christian family members trying to share their religion with atheists, Pagans, or their children.

The overwhelming majority of atheists and Pagans I studied were raised Christian. They were raised by Methodist, Catholic, Baptist, Pentecostal, Mormon, Lutheran, and Jehovah’s Witness parents. Their families often still hold religious worldviews. Though I studied a handful of parents whose families practiced Hinduism, Buddhism, or Judaism, only parents whose families identified as Christian complained of proselytizing. To be clear, not all parents I studied had Christian family members that proselytized, and even for those who did, proselytizers were in the minority, though they often held powerful family roles, such as mothers, fathers, and in-laws.

When discussing proselytizing family members I add the qualifier “Christian” for three reasons. First, parents in this study complained only about proselytizing family members that were Christian. Second, proselytizing family members came from a variety of Christian denominations. Finally, the Christian hegemony of the Bible Belt encourages many Christians to feel free to proselytize to atheists and Pagans and their children.

Atheist and Pagan parents faced a difficult choice: lose valuable family relationships and the resources associated with those relationships, or compromise their parenting and philosophical/religious beliefs. Vigorous resistance to proselytizing might have stopped it, but at high cost. Atheist and Pagan parents thus sought ways to
minimize the trouble caused by proselytizing, without offending or breaking off ties with otherwise beloved, supportive family members. One of the first things atheist and Pagan parents did was to assess the risk posed by their evangelizing family members.

ASSESSING RISK

Atheist and Pagan meetings were often filled with talk about proselytizing Christians. I overheard members tell stories about Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons who showed up uninvited at their doors; about receiving religious Christmas gifts at work; about declining invitations to join a prayer group at work; about responding to the colloquial “bless you” after a sneeze from strangers; and about coping with a perceived snub by another mother at a playground after admitting to no church membership. My fieldnotes are replete with examples of atheists and Pagans dealing with proselytizing Christians.

Group members shared ideas about how to respond to proselytizers. Advice ranged from complete dismissal (“You’ll learn to ignore it. It’s nothing.”) to overt hostility (“Tell them to fuck off!”). Pagans often advised invisibility (“Be very careful what you say. They’ll find out you’re Pagan!”). Atheists recently transplanted to the Bible Belt were surprised by the proselytizing they faced. Others seemingly accepted Christian proselytizing as a minor annoyance that was inevitable given the history and tradition of evangelical Christianity in the South.
When the topic turned specifically to instances of Christian family members proselytizing to parents and their children, the tone of the conversation became more serious. The advice offered was no longer so glib. Group members listened closely to each other's stories, offering thoughtful advice and support. The usual bravado with which childless atheists and Pagans dispensed advice disappeared, replaced instead with a sense of care and fragility in dealing with this prickly situation. It was evident that dealing with proselytizing Christian family members (most often parents, in-laws, or grandparents) was a common problem for parents, one that required great care and forethought.

Atheists and Pagans were bothered far more by proselytizing after becoming parents. The strongest objections arose after family members overstepped their bounds. For others, concern intensified after a child began “mindlessly mimicking” the beliefs and rituals of Christian family members. Parents were not so bothered by Christian family members’ prayers for a newborn or insistence on baptism. But as their children aged and became susceptible to religion, many parents came to see proselytizing as harmful after all.

Though both atheists and Pagans defined proselytizing Christian family members’ behaviors as problematic, they did not do so to the same degree. I observed both intragroup and intergroup differences in assessment of risk to children. Some atheists and Pagans felt proselytizing to be more of an irritation than a source of harm. Others saw it as tantamount to child abuse. However, there also existed substantial
difference between atheist and Pagan parents in that atheists were more likely to view proselytizing by Christian family as potentially harmful to children. Their Pagan counterparts were more likely to see any possible harm to be minor and/or reparable.

Because atheist parents viewed proselytizing as inherently dangerous for their children, they attempted to exert higher levels of control over the character of interactions between their children and proselytizing Christian family members. Parents approached this negotiation delicately as they found themselves forced into new terrain, having to negotiate cultural dictates of respect for elders—particularly one’s parents—with a powerful moral mandate to protect their children from harm. Many turned to local atheist support groups for help.  

At atheist group meetings and in online message boards, childless atheists tended towards extremes—either dismissing Christian family members’ proselytizing as innocuous, or calling it child abuse. Jordan, a childless atheist, provided a typical retort to a hypothetical presented by a group member involving a Christian family member arranging a baptism for a child behind a parent’s back: “Who cares? What harm does it do? Let them sprinkle their water and mumble some abracadabra—it doesn’t mean anything.” Another (childless) member added, “True. Let them have their play time.” Upon hearing Jordan’s response Frank said,

But it’s not just words. Those words tell a kid “You’re evil. You need to be washed of evil.” Like [Richard] Dawkins says, that’s child abuse! Tell me how that is not child abuse?

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23 At the time I originally undertook my fieldwork, no atheist parenting support group existed. Parents who sought community often gravitated to local atheist support groups consisting mainly of childless members.
I would fight them to the end on that. No way a kid of mine
would ever be baptized.

 Debate continued for a short while, but given that there was only one parent currently
raising a child present in a room of fourteen adults, the fervor soon died down.

 I observed similar extremes in Pagan group meetings, which were also
populated mainly by non-parents. However, given the value Pagans placed on tolerance,
statements about proselytizing to children were less hostile, though still extreme.

 Karina and her close friend Evie exchanged opinions about the best response if Karina’s
mother were to insist on taking Karina’s future children to church:

   Karina: I would tell mom thanks but no thanks. I wouldn’t
   want to hurt her feelings but I wouldn’t expose my kids to
   her crazy ideas about hell and end of days. That could really
   fuck up a kid! You know how she goes on. It messed with
   my head.

   Evie: But your mom can’t even help it. She is who she is.
   You ain’t gonna change that. You never could. Why not just
   let her take them to church with her? It’s not like it would
   hurt them, you know. They’re not like sacrificing babies. (As
   a joke and with a smirk Evie adds) Not like us witches.

 The interpretation of proselytizing as either innocuous or abusive was present in Pagan
 group meetings. But again, the content and tone of the conversation was different when
most people present were parents.

 Parents were less prone to expressing extreme opinions. Only a couple
subscribed to Jordan’s and Evie’s definition of proselytizing as harmless. Very few
subscribed to Frank’s and Karina’s perspective of proselytizing as abuse. The childless
had the luxury of taking the political high road or posturing. Parents, on the other hand, wanted to use their meetings to flesh out parenting strategies.

**Proselytizing as Harmless**

Atheist parents who thought that proselytizing to children was irritating but innocuous saw little need to limit the time Christian family members spent with their children. Lana exemplified this attitude in dealing with her Methodist parents’ proselytizing. When asked how she would feel if her Christian parents insisted on taking her son to church with them, she responded:

> Not a problem—they have taken him to church. It makes them happy. They enjoy [taking him]. They can show him off. [Question: Do you worry that there could be negative consequences?] Nah, as far as [my son] is concerned it’s just another experience. He sings some songs and makes art [in Sunday school]. I’m not worried he’ll turn into some kind of fanatic if that’s what you mean.

Lana emphasized the joy her parents experienced in “showing off” their grandson, a stereotypical grandparent-grandchild dynamic. Lana’s laid-back attitude toward her parents’ proselytizing was unusual, though she was not alone.

In interviews, one other atheist parent expressed little concern over Christian family members’ proselytizing to his children. Tim, father to three-year-old and eighteen-month-old daughters, emphasized to me in an interview how little weight his father’s proselytizing influence carried with his children:

> My dad and his wife take [my daughter] to church a couple times a month but honestly, who has the stronger
influence—me, the parent that sees her every day or grandpa who spends one hour with her twice a month? No contest there. If she hears anything weird at church, that will be erased by the mass amount of her time spent away from church.

Lana and Tim saw little likelihood of exposure to Christianity harming their children, so they didn’t try to limit the relationship between grandparent and child. Neither Lana nor Tim was active in the atheist parenting group. The most active members were those who dealt with high levels of proselytizing, and who saw it as potentially harmful to their children.

Pagan parents usually saw less danger in proselytizing by Christian family members than did atheist parents. Some Pagan parents even welcomed religious attention from their Christian family members. Pagans’ greater tolerance for proselytizing was due to a number of factors unique to their beliefs. These factors included a nuanced typology of Christians that relegated the majority of Christians to the category of good and harmless people, belief that exposure to Christianity would serve to reinforce children’s morals and values, desire for children to explore all religious options (including Christianity) in order to find authentic spirituality, and sometimes belief that their children would find Christianity boring.

Pagans were more likely than their atheist peers to differentiate between types of Christians. Pagans often distinguished “problem Christians” from “regular Christians.” The defining line for Pagans in regards to potential for harm to children was most often the line of fundamentalism, by which they meant moral rigidity and
unwillingness to accept diversity in belief. Regular Christians kept their beliefs to themselves for the most part, while problematic Christians disrespected others’ religious choices by constantly recruiting. The establishment of even a rudimentary typology of Christians by Pagans makes sense given their emphasis on values of empathy and tolerance, as well as their own marginalized religious identities.

Unlike their atheist counterparts, many Pagans viewed the majority of Christians as regular Christians—reasonable and good people who relegate belief and practice mainly to the private realm and respect others’ beliefs. Francine, mother of two children, hedged her criticism of pushy Christians by saying, “Some Christians really mess up their kids with religion. I mean, not most Christians, but the kind that are really over the top. You know, fundamentalist. But most Christians are just regular people. They’re good parents.” Francine’s sentiments were echoed throughout interviews with Pagan parents.

While they avoided institutionalized religion and rejected parental indoctrination of children into religion, they did not believe that religion was inherently harmful. In small doses (which is how many viewed grandma’s insistence on bringing grandkids to Christmas church services, for example), Pagans saw exposure to Christianity as a necessary part of their child’s ability to explore spirituality. Pagans were careful to differentiate between the dangers of religious belief and practice in general, and human beings’ misuse of institutionalized religion and dogmatic principles. As spiritual people, they embraced the concepts of divinity, afterlife, and religious
community. In fact, as discussed in chapter three, Pagans promoted transcendent, enchanted worldviews to their children. It’s not surprising, therefore, that Pagans, though wary of indoctrination or fundamentalism, were less anxious about a bit of conventional religion creeping into their children’s lives.

Pagans tended to emphasize overlapping values of Paganism and Christianity. By emphasizing commonalities, parents more readily accepted their children’s exposure to mainstream religion. Ashley, animist mother to two teenage children, explained her attitude toward her mother-in-law’s persistent efforts to take her teenage children to church with her:

[My mother-in-law] always asks if she can take the kids to church with her. I don’t tell the kids what to do but sometimes they do go with her. [Question: How do you feel about them going to church?] Well, it can’t hurt. What can it hurt? Love thy neighbor, don’t kill, don’t cheat, don’t lie. These are basically good lessons.

Ashley chose to emphasize humanitarian values in Christianity rather than specific doctrines or principles over which Pagans and Christians might disagree.

Lorna, Pagan mother of two, focused on the value of exposure to Christianity as religious literacy education:

For a few years I was very adamant, very adamantly anti-Christian... But after the kids were born I started the transformation then. It didn’t bother me. [My mom’s] bringing them to church every week is probably helpful to them because they go to church, then they are going to be a part of what everyone else is in. So they are going to know. They’re not going to stand up in class and go, “Who is Jesus Christ?” You know, they already learned that one.
Far from worrying about her kids’ exposure to mainstream religion, Lorna, like other Pagans, thought it would help make her kids more culturally and religiously literate.

As also discussed in chapter three, Pagans valued the pursuit of authentic spirituality. Authentic spirituality, according to Pagans, entails a willingness to “try on” different religions. Yet many Pagans also believe that every individual is predestined to walk a unique spiritual path. Through experimentation and willingness to recognize destiny (“You will know when you discover your path; everything will fall into place”), Pagan parents hoped that eventually their children would find their authentic spirituality. Because of these beliefs, they were unlikely to be panicked by proselytizing Christian family members, as long as they deemed Christian family members to be “regular Christians.”

A handful of Pagan parents (but not one atheist parent) viewed proselytizing by Christian family members as moot, citing their child’s likely boredom with exposure to Christianity. When pressed to explain, many responded much like Greg:

Kids aren’t interested in religion. They’re interested in Xbox games. There is absolutely no point in parents or others pushing kids into religion when the kid, in his head, is just thinking about other stuff. They’re just not ready for it yet. Kids will come to their own spirituality, if ever, when they are ready. That may be when they are a teenager or it may be much later in life like it was for me. For some, it may be never.

Pagan parents often cared little about others’ proselytizing to their children, because they believed their children to be indifferent toward religion. Though ideally they wanted their children to explore spirituality, they saw spirituality as more of an adult
interest. The assumption that kids would find Christianity and church boring was prevalent among Pagan parents and surely contributed to their more relaxed attitude toward proselytizing. For these and other reasons described above, Pagan parents were less likely than atheist parents to view proselytizing by family members as dangerous and needing to be controlled.

Almost all atheist parents and some Pagan parents thought that proselytizing by family members could harm their children. They differed in the type and level of harm they imagined proselytizing might cause. In general, atheists feared proselytizing would stifle their child’s desire and/or ability to think critically. Atheists also saw it as harmful to manipulate children’s beliefs and behaviors through fear tactics—a practice they associated with Christianity. The few Pagan parents who saw proselytizing as harmful did not want to see their children compelled to embrace a singular worldview. All of these parents attempted to resist proselytizing by Christian family members by erecting physical or ideological boundaries.

BOUNDARY CONSTRUCTION

To maintain familial bonds and access to resources, some parents allowed Christian family members to proselytize to their children. Others tried to stop or limit proselytizing by limiting contact between their kids and Christian family members. The most obvious boundary a parent could create between child and proselytizing family members was physical. Though this strategy was rare, in at least a few cases parents
limited or eliminated physical contact between their children and proselytizing Christian family members.

**Physical Boundaries**

For atheist and Pagan parents who believed that exposure to Christian proselytizing could harm their children, limiting the amount of contact between proselytizing Christian family members and their children was the ideal solution. One Pagan father told me, “Given the kind of [religious and physical] abuse I had to deal with growing up, I keep my kids far from Grandpa. If he can’t reach ‘em, he can’t hurt ‘em.” Asked if he felt bad about keeping his father from his grandchildren, he responded, “Yes and no. Do I wish I could trust him to be around my kids without doing damage with his holier than thou bullshit? Yeah. Do I think he’s capable of that? No.” This father was adamant about enforcing physical boundaries to protect his children. Because he viewed the stakes as high, this father maintained a barrier between his father and his children. While most atheist and Pagan parents did not share this father’s level of fear, many expressed a desire to remove proselytizing family members from the lives of their children altogether.

Only one other atheist father, Jim, was equally adamant about keeping his (Jehovah’s Witness) mother from proselytizing to his toddler-aged daughter. As he said to a group of atheist parents, “My mother has been told that if she discusses religion with Kira ever, that’s it. She will never get to see her again. And she knows that I mean
it, too.” The other parents seemed amazed by Jim’s hard line approach. Several factors, however, made this strategy untenable for most parents: cultural expectations of respecting elders (particularly parents and grandparents), a desire for access to resources, and complex, emotional ties.

A more common strategy parents employed was to minimize the amount of time they and their children spent with proselytizing family members. As one atheist mother put it, “Ideally, I wish my mom could spend more time with [my son], but since she never stops talking about church and Jesus, I do what I can to keep her from spending much time with him—and never alone time. But she’s my mom, you know?” This mother, like many parents, minimized the amount of time her child spent with certain family members.

Many parents, both atheist and Pagan, attempted to insert themselves in all interactions between certain family members and their children, in hopes that their presence would deter those family members from proselytizing. But if proselytizing occurred nonetheless, they wanted to be there to intervene or (more commonly) to do “damage control” after the fact. But even this strategy was complicated by emotional ties. It often led to feelings of guilt on the part of parents. While many atheist parents expressed desire to shut down Christian family members’ proselytizing altogether, this was usually treated as unrealistic and not worth trying.
Ideological Boundaries

When physical boundaries would create too much conflict for concerned parents to bear, they sought to create ideological boundaries. This sometimes meant allowing Christian family to share their religion with kids as long as they left out or deemphasized what atheist parents saw as the most dangerous or controlling aspect of religion: the inducement of fear. Atheist parents hoped to strike a compromise with proselytizing loved ones by allowing some intrusion of religion, while disallowing its negative aspects.

Agnostic mother Stacey voiced concern over her mother-in-law’s proselytizing to both her husband Dylan and their children. At the time of our interview, Stacey told me that she and her husband had just resolved to “handle” Dylan’s mother’s proselytizing by limiting the scope of what she was allowed to discuss with their young daughters:

I’m not confrontational, but I do think the best solution that we have come up with—the productive conversation that Dylan and I have had about this recently was—and this I feel is us yielding quiet a bit. [As if speaking to her husband] “Personally, I think it’s being generous that your mother wants to talk about her positive aspects of her religion, Christianity, with our daughters. That’s fine. But she is not to ever go into any of the scare tactics or the negative things or the, you know, that, you know, the hell stuff.” Like [she is not allowed to say to our daughter], “Don’t do that or you are going to go to hell.” But she wants to talk about how Jesus loves you and this and that. So we thought maybe that was a reasonable compromise to ask her to leave that out.
This compromise was meant to preserve respect for her mother-in-law’s beliefs, while allowing Stacey and Dylan to feel good about providing sufficient protection to their daughters from the more dangerous parts of Christian doctrine. Other parents took a similar approach, or tried to.

In separate interviews, Stacey and Dylan said that they doubted that their compromise could be pulled off successfully. They had little faith that grandma would respect the ideological boundaries they set. Stacey clarified:

But we don’t know how realistic it will be for her to, if she can, could really like cleanly just cut out the bad [parts of her religion]. It would be interesting. We will probably try it. We will see. [Question: Do you think that you are going to end up having to tell her specifically what’s OK to talk about and what isn’t?] Yeah, I think we would have to tell her directly.

Dylan shared a similarly negative outlook on the possibility of success in this strategy:

Stacey and I decided we will have to have a talk with my mother. She’s going to have to give a little too. Nobody cares if she wants to just tell [our daughters] about her religion. That’s fine. But, look, we’re gonna tell Mom to lay off the scary stuff but, it’s not gonna work. I mean if it does...it might last like a week but it’s not gonna last. Mom does what Mom wants to do. She’s a believer. It’s important to her. How can we ask her to give that up? It’s who she is.

[Question: But your non-belief is who you are too, right?] (Uncomfortable pause followed by a look of frustration) Yeah, but my mom will never get that. In her world good people go to church and pray. End of story. She’s never going to get us.
Neither Stacey nor Dylan was hopeful that they could curb Dylan's mother's proselytizing. Other atheist parents felt the same way about their family members. Parental authority was not always enough authority to keep religion out of their kids' lives. A great deal of emotion work was necessary to deal with the ensuing frustrations.

COPING STRATEGIES

Marilyn Frye (1983) describes the sense of entrapment members of oppressed groups experience in everyday life. Bound by complex webs of privilege that limit their ability to behave freely, marginalized and oppressed people must choose between resistance or compliance, both routes creating emotional stress and strain. The parents I studied experienced this strain in dealing with proselytizing family members in the context of a hegemonically Christian culture. Here I examine the emotion work strategies parents used to make this situation bearable.

“We Just Don’t Talk About It”

In telling stories about Christian family members’ proselytizing, atheist and Pagan parents often claimed that in their families there was “agreement to disagree” or
“agreement just never to talk about religion.” Though these contradictions—between proselytizing and agreeing not to talk about religion—might appear obvious, most parents did not recognize these as contradictory until I pointed it out. Kristine, atheist mother to a son in elementary school, described her more recent relationship with her Southern Baptist mother:

[My mother] doesn’t ever ask any more questions about religion, and I think it is because she knows that I am probably doing something that she doesn’t want me to do, so she just would rather live in ignorance. And that is sad to me because this is a very important part of my life. And I know she doesn’t agree with it, but I don’t agree with her going to church three times a week either. You know? Yeah, we just don’t talk about it.

While Kristine described her earlier relationship with her mother as extremely difficult, marked by a heated argument when Kristine was “outed” as atheist by an anonymous email sent to her mother, she now presents her relationship with her mother as sad but stable, as long as they “just don’t talk about it.”

Some Pagans described a similar relationship with Christian parents. Joel, Pagan animist father of three children, described how his relationship with his “totally Christian” mother evolved over time:

I was surprised at her, you know? The reaction when I told my mom [I was Pagan]. She didn’t, she just can’t get it. She’s totally Christian. She will never change. Ever. So when I told her she was like, “Oh, I’m so disappointed.” So I think that was her first response. She was like, ”Oh, great.” It was a bad thing. So if I tried to talk about it with her she would always change the subject. She doesn’t want to talk about it. Because she kept saying “You need to find a church.” And I told her, well, I found one, you know? The Church of the
Elements [Pagan church]. Well, she found out what it was, so she kept telling me I need to find a church, so I just gave up. [Question: She did not accept that as a church?] No, it is not acceptable. Not acceptable. Yeah, so now I just don’t talk about it with her. And I think, I don’t know, but we don’t talk about [religion] anymore. It just doesn’t ever come up.

Though Joel admits that his mother was devastated when she found out he was Pagan, he frames his current relationship with his mother in much the same terms as his atheist counterpart Kristine. After trying to gain acceptance through repeated conversations, both parties settled with a frustrating but seemingly equitable tactic of agreeing to never discuss religion. This informal arrangement appeared to allow atheist and Pagan parents to maintain their marginalized identities, while lowering the chances of hostility and conflict with family members.

When Rhetoric and Reality Clash

Atheist and Pagan parents were not totally happy with the agreement to avoid the topic of religion, because it left a proverbial elephant in the room. The more serious problem was that religious family members often failed to respect the agreement. Atheist parents cited multiple occasions of Christian family members bringing up religion—after supposedly agreeing not to. The rhetoric and reality of these relationships simply did not match.

Atheist Kristine claimed a we-just-don’t-talk-about-it arrangement with her mother. But then she gave multiple examples of how her mother inserted her religion
into their relationship: repeatedly inviting the family to church for special events; talking to Kristine’s son about heaven as the place where people go after death; and buying the family a Bible for Christmas. Kristine even suspected that her mother had baptized her son behind her back.

Pagan Joel experienced similar contradictions. After he and his wife claimed (in separate interviews) that they did not discuss religion with his “totally Christian” mother, both told of recent times when Joel’s mother had brought up religion. Joel’s mother had invited them to church, left religious pamphlets in their home, and asked them to join her church. After asserting that the topic of religion “doesn’t ever come up,” Joel said,

But [my mother] still says I need to find a church. [Question: Has she asked you this recently?] Yup. She still says that. But it kind of never progresses from there. Because I am going to say, I have a church. And that is my response every time. Yeah.

In both Joel’s and Kristine’s cases, the supposed agreement to avoid speaking of religion was not respected by their Christian mothers. They were not alone. Many atheist and Pagan parents cited a similar arrangement based on what one atheist referred to as a “live and let live” attitude. Atheist and Pagan parents claimed to have kept up their side of the bargain by not discussing their beliefs or practices with Christian family members.

For the most part, the atheist and Pagan parents indeed took a live-and-let-live approach in dealing with their family members’ religious beliefs and practices. This
approach, however, was not reciprocated. Atheist and Pagan parents—those who claimed never to talk about religion with Christian family members—cited these examples of religious intrusion:

- The father of one of the atheist dads left an anti-atheist book in the guest room after visiting for a weekend.
- The mother of a Pagan mom signed up her granddaughter for vacation Bible school.
- The mother-in-law of an atheist woman invited her to her home annually for a birthday party for Jesus.
- The mother of a Pagan woman repeatedly joked, while visiting in her daughter’s home, about her daughter flying away on a broomstick.
- The father of an atheist woman angrily demanded that the family say grace before every meal eaten in the atheist mother’s home.

These examples are perhaps not surprising in the Bible Belt. More surprising was the way that some atheist and Pagan parents clung to their account of sustaining relationships with Christian family members through mutual respect for one another’s beliefs by avoiding the topic of religion altogether. This respect, it seemed, was extended in only one direction.

Because atheist and Pagan parents described many instances when their arrangement became one-sided—with efforts to respect Christians’ beliefs left unreciprocated—I refer to their continued reliance on the “we just don’t talk about it” strategy as a family myth. Hochschild and Machung (1989) found that couples often develop family myths, “versions of reality that obscure a core truth in order to manage a family tension.” While Hochschild and Machung were referring to a strategy used to
cope with inequality in household labor, their analysis maps onto inequalities experienced by atheist and Pagan parents in their dealings with some Christian family members. Unlike the couples Hochschild and Machung studied, the atheist and Pagan parents I studied maintained egalitarian parenting arrangements. The inequality they used myths to obscure concerned religious intrusion by proselytizing family members, not housework.

Atheist and Pagan parents used a rhetoric of equality to describe a condition of inequality. But atheist and Pagan parents differed in their reliance on this rhetoric. Atheist parents were less willing than their Pagan counterparts to accept their inability to stop Christian family members from proselytizing. When probed about their emotional responses to this situation, atheist parents expressed more anxiety than Pagan parents. This made the myth of equality more important to them as an emotion management device. Pagans more readily admitted the gap between rhetoric and reality, acknowledging that the “we just don’t talk about it” strategy was more fiction than fact. If Pagans were more willing to accept this situation, it was perhaps because their tenuous class position made them more dependent on economic resources obtained through family ties.

CONCLUSION

The parents I studied faced a set of tough questions. Do they take issue with proselytizing Christian family members? Is proselytizing potentially harmful to their
children? If so, what should they do about it? And, ultimately, what happens when they try to do something about it and fail? These questions stem from the larger problem of intrusion on marginalized parents by the privileged. This is an old problem. The family has often been a site of contention between dominant and subordinate groups.

Previous research on intrusion in parenting by powerful outsiders has focused mainly on how bureaucratic government representatives have used their power to shape and limit the lives of marginalized parents. For example, social scientists have studied how the American military enforced government mandates to reshape parenting practices of imprisoned Japanese in America during WWII (Espiritu 2007; Levine 1995); how federal immigration law shaped Chinese immigrants’ ability to form family structures of their choosing (Espiritu 2007); how social service agencies police and constrain the parenting practices of foster parents (Swartz 2004); how courts have withheld full access to parental rights for gay and lesbian parents (Weston 1997; Sullivan 2004); how welfare agencies have challenged the parenting practices of those who apply for and receive welfare assistance from the government (Hays 2003); how government has passed welfare legislation to promote traditional marriage (Coontz and Folbre 2010); and how employers of immigrant live-in domestic workers (nannies and maids) infringe upon the ability of mothers to parent their biological children (Parrenas 2001). In sum, an examination of how powerful others intrude on the parenting (and family formation) of the marginalized has been well documented in the sociological literature.
As suggested above, studies of intrusion on marginalized parents tend to focus overwhelmingly on the power of government (via legislation, court mandates, military might, and social service policies, etc.) to shape and limit the contours of family formation and parenting. Most of these studies emphasize how the tremendous disparity in power between government and minority parents reinforces preexisting inequalities. Yet intrusion on parents by the privileged is not limited to faceless bureaucracies. It can also take the form of a more intimate dynamic, such as the employer-employee relations studied by Hondagneu-Sotela (2001).

In her study of wealthy employers and immigrant domestic workers, Hondagneu-Sotela found that employers retained nearly total control over the lives of domestic workers. The high demands employers placed on nannies made it nearly impossible for nannies to parent their own children. Moreover, the intimate nature of the relationship made it hard for nannies to stand up for their rights as parents. Nannies had to navigate complex emotional relationships with employers, and do so from a position of limited power. Though atheist and Pagan parents were not subordinate to proselytizing Christian family members, they had a similarly complex and difficult emotional relationship to negotiate in trying to enforce their rights as parents.

A welfare recipient can distance him- or herself emotionally from a meddling social service worker. In such cases, the impersonal nature of the intrusion can make it easier to deal with emotionally. This coping mechanism did not work for the parents I studied. When atheist and Pagan parents vented about Christian family members’
proselytizing, it was often accompanied by feelings of guilt and anxiety. Atheist and Pagan parents wanted to protect their children from religious intrusion while maintaining loving relationships with key family members. When they did the former, they sometimes sacrificed the latter, and they felt bad about it.

Atheist and Pagan parents talked a great deal about how they calculated the risk posed by proselytizing. Parents drew on their past experiences with religion, their knowledge of the offending proselytizers (usually their parents or in-laws), and their specific parenting values (as discussed in chapter 3) to assess the potential for harm. On this matter, atheists and Pagans calculated differently. With few exceptions, atheist parents saw proselytizing as more dangerous than did Pagans. Pagan parents were not thrilled with proselytizing by Christian family members, but they were not in distress over it. Their belief that children would find their way to authentic spirituality made exposure to conventional religion less of a threat.

The poor and working-class Pagan parents, who often relied on economic and other forms of help from family members, felt that the risk of proselytizing was minor compared to the benefits that came from maintaining supportive ties with Christian relatives. The more affluent atheist parents could make a different calculation. They had no compelling economic reasons to tolerate proselytizing and thereby risk their child’s open-mindedness and ability to think critically. Once level of resources and specific parenting values are taken into account, it makes sense that many more atheists than Pagans would see proselytizing as a threat to their children.
Interestingly, however, almost all of the atheist and Pagan parents who tried to get proselytizers to stop or modify their proselytizing were unsuccessful. This lack of success was again experienced differently depending on social class. When Pagan parents couldn’t get proselytizing Christian family members to stop, they often redefined it as unproblematic or covered it up with a family myth that created an illusion of equality. In interviews, Pagan parents usually admitted that these myths obscured a reality with which they remained uncomfortable.

Atheist parents, on the other hand, clung to family myths of equality. It seems that they needed these myths in a way that their Pagan counterparts did not. Pagan parents were accustomed to experiencing the world as unfair, given their lower social class and occasionally demeaning service-work jobs. The upper-middle-class atheist parents were accustomed to having more control over their lives. As such, they believed that they were entitled to have their wishes as parents respected by others. When the boundaries they laid down were not respected, this threatened their sense of control as individuals, and especially as parents. Family myths of equality minimized this threat and restored their sense of control. For this reason, atheists were more inclined to believe their family mythology than were Pagans.
In this final chapter, I summarize the analytic highlights from the three preceding analytic chapters. I will discuss how my research illustrates the tensions experienced by minority parents whose value as parents is challenged by hegemonic standards they cannot and would not choose to fulfill. I will flesh out the strengths and limitations of this research, and conclude by discussing directions for future research.

In chapter two I argued that atheist parents felt most threatened by the stereotype of the angry, militantly anti-religious atheist. For Pagan parents, the most threatening stereotypes were of hedonism and flakiness. Defensive othering—admitting that these stereotypes accurately applied to other atheists or Pagans, but not them—was one way that parents defended themselves against stigma. Defensive othering was particularly appealing as it allowed parents to avoid direct conflict with others. Though both groups engaged in defensive othering, their strategies varied, reflecting their differing needs as parents in the Bible Belt South. These needs, in turn, reflected their differing levels of economic, human, and cultural capital.

In chapter three I examined the varying ways that atheist and Pagan parents instilled a sense of reality and morality in their children. While both groups of parents opposed indoctrination, they transmitted ideas and values that mirrored their own to a great extent. Atheist parents taught their children to value science, logic, and nature.
This socialization process included reliance on science and nature-themed toys, books, movies, and outings; an emphasis on critical thinking skills; and explaining both life and death through a scientific, naturalistic lens. Pagan parents, in contrast, taught their children to believe in the power of magic and in an enchanted world where things are not as they appear on the surface. In interacting with their children, Pagans anthropomorphized nature and material objects, undertook magic-themed play, and encouraged their children to recognize and rely on intuition as a legitimate and divine source of knowledge and power.

Atheist and Pagan parents instilled in their children corollary values consistent with the worldviews they sought to transmit. Though both sets of parents emphasized individualism, it was a different kind of individualism in each case. Atheist parents stressed competitive individualism to their kids—the view that achievement should depend on merit, whereas their Pagan counterparts emphasized the value of creative individualism—the view that the internal pursuit of authenticity, whether artistic or spiritual, should trump mainstream, middle-class values of competition and achievement.

In chapter four, the final analytic chapter, I examined how atheist and Pagan parents coped with unwelcomed proselytizing by some Christian family members. Though atheists expressed greater concern than Pagans over possible danger of proselytizing to their children, both sets of parents struggled with how to deal with this infringement on their parenting. Parents struggled to balance their role as protector of
their children with their roles as daughter, son, sibling, grandchild, etc., vis-à-vis their proselytizing family members.

Parents tried to mitigate proselytizing by family members through physical separation of proselytizer from child or, more commonly, through the creation of ideological boundaries. In particular, atheist and Pagan parents sought to regulate the aspect of religion they deemed most harmful: the inducement of fear. However, in trying to get proselytizing family members to filter out certain elements of their faith, atheist and Pagan parents met with little success. To resolve this dissonance, they created “family myths” to downplay the level of meddling by proselytizing family members. These myths helped to manage the bad feelings caused by the proselytizing and the inability to stop it, but maintaining the myths also required emotional energy and sometimes left parents exhausted and feeling even more alienated from key family members.

The implications of this research project extend beyond an understanding of the experiences of atheist and Pagan parents in the U.S. Bible Belt South. Here, I discuss how my analyses of stigma management (chapter two), socialization of children (chapter three), and intrusions by proselytizing Christian family members (chapter four) contribute to understanding broader social processes pertaining to the reproduction of inequality in the family.
RESCUING MORAL IDENTITY FROM THE MARGINS

According to Goffman, being able to present oneself as a moral actor is an important part of being a creditable member of society (1959; 1971). In Western cultures, becoming a parent is one way to claim moral status. Parenthood, particularly motherhood, is accorded great significance as an indicator of moral worth (May 2008). Even fathers, who are still assigned the limited cultural script of “good dad” (mainly through breadwinning), are accorded moral worth as parents (Coltrane 1997). As such, parenthood is generally held to be an indicator of, or at least an avenue to claiming, moral worth.

While parenthood has become politicized in the “mommy wars” that derive from the larger culture wars in the U.S. (Crittenden 2001; Hays 1996; Nelson 2010; Hardisty 1999), parenthood remains a path to moral renewal. Adults whose reputations have been tarnished by past deviance are granted the possibility of reinventing themselves as moral by becoming parents. Reclaiming moral worthiness through motherhood has been documented in research on poor and working-class teenage mothers who quit “partying” to raise their children (Luker 1996) and ex-strippers who leave sex work to become mothers (Frank 2002). Though operating differently, fatherhood can also be a site of moral identity renewal (Hamer 2001).

When people break with social norms, such as the case with teenage mothers, strippers, and the atheist or Pagan parents I studied, they may attempt to repair their “spoiled” identity by aligning their behaviors with cultural expectations, allowing them
to present a morally acceptable self (Goffman 1963; Mills 1940). Indeed, many parents perceive little choice but to try to correct their previously spoiled moral identities. Pressure to be good parents is intense enough to warrant a return to conventional morality (Ecklund and Lee 2011). Sanctions for being a bad parent can be severe and can have repercussions for one's children. Under these conditions, it is no surprise that many parents look for ways to conform to normative expectations, or invent ways to manage the stigmas that might spoil their identities as parents.

One stigma management strategy is to strongly reaffirm hegemonic norms. For example, Arendell (1995) studied divorced fathers who saw themselves as victims of a gender-biased divorce process that relegated them to the status of “bad father.” These fathers propped up their spoiled moral identity by emphasizing their hegemonic masculinity. They engaged in “battle” with their ex-wives—a fight they viewed to be part of a larger conflict of the sexes. Drawing on cultural norms regarding masculinity, power, and control, these fathers coped with what they perceived to be an attack on fatherhood by highlighting their good and proper manliness. Atheist and Pagan parents assimilated to hegemonic norms not by denying their deviant identity (usually), but rather by embracing certain negative stereotypes and applying them to others.

As noted earlier in this dissertation, embracing hegemonic norms means, by definition, endorsing the perspectives of dominant groups. For example, Ecklund and Lee (2011) studied atheist and agnostic parents who raised their children within mainstream religious institutions. Though the parents held no belief in a deity, they
acquiesced to the conventional notion that religion was the proper vehicle for instilling morality in children. The parents I studied deemed this to be an unacceptable strategy, in that they disagreed with the normative assumption that mainstream Christianity offered the best approach to providing children a solid moral foundation.

Many of the atheist and Pagan parents I studied could have chosen to return to mainstream religion to raise their children. They could have accepted hegemonic standards and remained under the radar of disapproving others. Returning to mainstream religion clearly would have made their lives easier in some ways. Yet they were committed to their secular or Pagan beliefs and to the identities based on those beliefs. Moreover, the worldviews they embraced made them better parents, in their view, than religious indoctrinators.

The stigmatized can also organize to repair their spoiled identities by reframing the majority perspective as problematic. For example, Naples (1998) showed how mothers in poor neighborhoods fought against the moral stigma of living in impoverished neighborhoods, a location that led middle-class outsiders to accuse them of laziness and welfare dependency. They resisted these controlling images by engaging in community activism addressing structural issues of poverty. Rather than accept personal blame for their circumstance of poverty as others would have them do, these mothers rejected this interpretation, pushing instead for structural changes to address the systematic nature of their oppression.
Smith (2013) offers the parallel example of culturally stigmatized atheists coming together to form the organization American Atheists—at least partially to fight accusations by outsiders of the inherent immorality of atheism. The efforts by this group to educate Americans about the naturalness of secular morality can be seen as a form of collective identity work aimed at a diffuse audience (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). In the cases of Naples’s low-income mothers and Smith’s atheists, we see the stigmatized refusing to accept dominant definitions of their immorality and instead organizing to oppose these definitions (Collins 2000).

Few of the atheists and Pagans I studied considered any kind of organized resistance to their stigmatization. As parents, they viewed activism as risky. Ironically, however, it is as parents that they experienced the most discrimination, yet as parents they felt least able to do much about it. So, rather than fight the enemy, they looked for ways to peacefully coexist. Many atheists embraced a “coexistor” identity that involved passivity towards proselytizers, tolerance of religion, and sometimes even pursuit of secular spirituality. Pagans tried to create safe-haven communities for socializing with other family-friendly Pagans. And because of their less privileged class position, Pagans also worried that activism might jeopardize legal custody of their children or their ties with Christian others—employers and family members—who provided essential resources.

The accounts used to deflect stigma and repair spoiled identities are more likely to be accepted when they build on widely accepted ideologies (Scott and Lyman 1968;
Orbuch 1997). For example, Scully and Marolla (1984) showed how convicted rapists drew upon pervasive rape myths to excuse and justify their behavior. Heltsley and Calhoun (2003) found that mothers of young girls in beauty pageants deflected accusations of child exploitation by drawing upon common notions of emphasized femininity as harmless to girls. And Godwin (2004) showed how mothers of troubled teenagers invoked popular notions of personal responsibility to avoid being blamed for their children’s misbehavior. What atheists and Pagans can count on is that negative stereotypes of atheists and Pagans are widespread, thus making it possible to craft accounts that acknowledge and affirm these discrediting stereotypes, while denying their applicability to themselves.

Paying closer attention to life course transitions, such as becoming a parent, is necessary to understand how people define, redefine, display, and repair moral identities. As shown in earlier chapters, the accounts given by childless atheists and Pagans differed tremendously in tone and motivation from accounts given by those who became parents. Financial and cultural standing also matter. Relatively well-resourced atheist parents crafted moral accounts more for pride and ease of personal relationships. Pagan parents, who possessed far fewer resources, crafted accounts as a matter of necessity.

Atheists and Pagans who were parenting from outside the religious mainstream understandably drew upon hegemonic norms to engage in the defensive othering by which they deflected stigma and upheld their moral identities as parents. By affirming
and then distancing themselves from the stereotypes that many people in U.S. society find most believable and most threatening, atheists and Pagans inadvertently made it harder for others outside the religious mainstream to claim moral identities as parents. In effect, atheist and Pagan parents contributed to their own marginalization by reifying controlling images of atheists and Pagans—a strategy that would not have been necessary apart from Christian hegemony in the Bible Belt.

PARENTING STYLES AND VALUES

My research adds to our understanding of how social class influences parenting style and values. Though many Americans believe social class has little to do with parenting (Lareau 2003), sociologists long ago established that social class shapes parenting practices and the transmission of values (Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003; Hays 1996; Nelson 2010; Rubin 1976, 1994). Social class also shapes the ways in which parents interact with their children, in terms of tone, frequency, intensity, and affective quality (Kohn 1969; Lareau 2003; Hays 1996; Nelson 2010; Rubin 1976, 1994). As Annette Lareau (2003:236) puts it, “Family practices cohere by social class.”

One well-documented pattern is the tendency of working-class parents to teach their children to follow rules and obey external authority figures, and for upper-middle and middle-class parents to put more emphasis on curiosity, happiness, and self-direction. Forty years after Melvin Kohn (1969) observed this pattern, Annette Lareau (2003) observed much the same. Middle-class parents, Lareau found, engaged in
practices of *concerted cultivation*, actively fostering their children’s cognitive development and acquisition of social skills. Working-class and poor parents saw their children’s development as occurring naturally, as long as children were provided with comfort, food, and shelter. Lareau referred to this as the *natural growth* model. Middle-class parents explained rules and decisions to their children, in contrast to working-class and poor parents who emphasized quick and consistent obedience.

My study both confirms past findings on social class and parenting and deviates from them. The atheist parents I studied, almost exclusively of the upper middle class, fit the intensive parenting/concerted cultivation model; they strove to foster values of hard work, ambition, and critical thinking in their children. As discussed in chapter 3, these are the values of competitive individualism. One twist on previous findings is that atheist parenting couples tended to be egalitarian, concerted cultivation as likely to be accomplished by father as by mother. I attribute this to the strong atheist emphasis on science, which in U.S. culture is usually coded as masculine.

Also of interest were the atheists’ motivations for engaging in intensive parenting. The upper-middle-class parents I studied emphasized values of hard work, ambition, and competition in the hopes that their children would also attain upper-middle-class status. However, in interviews it also became clear that atheist parents, most of whom were transplants to the Bible Belt South, upped the intensity of their concerted cultivation in response to what they perceived to be an environment hostile to secularism. This increasing intensity was evident in atheists’ reliance on Montessori
education (over 50% of children had been, were currently, or were soon to be enrolled in Montessori schools) and the high percentage (40%) of atheist parents who were already homeschooling or who planned to homeschool their children in the near future. Compared to the national average of 2.9% of school-aged children being homeschooled in 2007 (The National Center for Education Statistics), the atheist parents I studied were an anomaly.

Atheist parents feared that their children would succumb to what they saw as Christian ways of thinking—including a facile, inflexible moral code, and willingness to accept authority without critical engagement. In response to the Christian hegemony of the Bible Belt, some atheist parents went beyond the concerted cultivation described by Lareau (2003). They ramped up their level of control over how their children were socialized and attempted to ensure that their children would remain as insulated from a fundamentalist worldview as possible. From this study we can glean what happens when affluent minority parents feel threatened by Christian hegemony.

It was the Pagan parents, however, who deviated most strongly from the expected pattern. Given their class status, one would expect Pagans to try to foster in their children conformity and obedience to authority. But this was not what I observed. Pagan parents abhorred conformity and unquestioned obedience to authority. They did not stress the achievement of success through conformity and taking orders. Pagan parents encouraged their children to explore individuality creatively and with few
limits. It would appear that religion—in their case Paganism—trumps social class in shaping parenting values and styles.

Part of the explanation may also be that while Pagans often work at low-paying, low-status service jobs, they have above average levels of education for people in such jobs. It was not unusual for the Pagans I studied to have attended some college or to hold a bachelor's degree. In group meetings I repeatedly fieldnoted how well-read Pagans were, particularly in history and theology. It is likely that this mismatch between (higher) education and (lower) income allowed Pagan parents a unique perspective from which to develop their parental values.

While other parents may shape their parenting values around the goal of socializing children to become economically self-sufficient adults, Pagans’ belief that reality is not what it appears to be inclines them to think differently about what they want for their children. Rather than raise their children simply to be able to make a living, they wanted their children to appreciate magic and authentic spirituality. There was no way such unconventional goals could be achieved by emphasizing obedience and conformity.

I have demonstrated that established patterns between social class and parenting are by no means universal. While the upper-middle-class atheist parents I studied socialized their children in the expected manner, the Pagan parents I studied did not. They chose to reject values of conformity and deference to authority in favor of fostering nonconformity and nearly unconstrained creativity in children. And they did
so knowing their children would likely face conflict with authority figures because of this incongruence. It thus seems clear that other factors can trump social class in parenting. So what can the Pagan pattern tell us about parenting style and social class more generally?

The implications of this finding are threefold. First, it allows us, as sociologists, to remain cautious in our understanding of social class and parenting (or race, gender, or sexuality and parenting for that matter). The patterns we observe are always the result of intricately-connected socially shared beliefs. Second, it reminds us of the need to look for exceptions to the rule. Though a pattern may hold under many conditions for many groups of people, we can learn much by examining outliers. Finally, research such as this challenges us to consider the difference between individual resistance and structural change. Embracing non-conformist identities might foster some dissident thinking, but without organized action this does not necessarily lead to social change.

RELIGIOUS INTRUSION

Atheist and Pagan parents expected their parenting values and choices to be respected by family members, or at least quietly tolerated. Yet this was not the case. Not only were their children proselytized, but it seemed that there was little the atheist and Pagan parents could do to stop it. No matter what defense they mounted, Christian family members kept trying to recruit them. This reveals much about power, privilege, and Christian hegemony in the Bible Belt.
Atheist and Pagan parents are much like other groups of minority parents who have their parenting questioned or infringed upon by more powerful others. Family sociologists have documented the experiences of government intrusion in the lives of foster parents (Swartz 2004), Japanese and Japanese-American families imprisoned during WWII (Espiritu 2007, Levine 1995), and families receiving public assistance (Hays 2003). Intrusions can also be of a more personal nature, such as when family and friends of interracial couples intervene (Rockquemore and Henderson 2010) and when classmates, friends and family patrol gay teenagers’ romantic relationships (Savin-Williams 1996). In each case, we see the more powerful intruding upon the less powerful.

Atheist and Pagan parents found themselves in the uncomfortable situation of having to defend their parenting from loved ones, parents, or in-laws who routinely overstepped appropriate boundaries. This occurred in large part because atheists and Pagans found themselves in a broader culture that devalued their beliefs. The situation was made worse by the strength of Christian hegemony in the Bible Belt South. When atheist and Pagan parents failed to follow local norms for the moral socialization of their children, some Christian family members saw the opening to proselytize and felt justified, it seems, in doing so.

The parents I studied endured cognitive and emotional dissonance in dealing with proselytizing Christian family members. They objected to the proselytizing and were frustrated by their inability to stop it. But most did not want to go so far as to cut
off their parents from their grandchildren, or to break family ties that were otherwise enjoyable and supportive. The more privileged atheists were caught off-guard by their seeming inability to have their desires respected by family members. Pagans, while disappointed, seemed all too familiar with being unable to control their circumstances. So, rather than demand change, atheists and Pagans changed their attitudes, perhaps fearing the loss of important family ties and associated resources.

The experiences of atheist and Pagan parents show that the reproduction of Christian hegemony relies not only on the powerful working together to maintain privilege, but also, to a smaller degree, on the cooperation of the less powerful. In the present case, atheist and Pagan parents capitulated to Christian hegemony, at least in part, for the sake of family harmony. More aggressive enforcement of physical and ideological boundaries would have been emotionally and— for the Pagans— economically costly. Though I did not directly study proselytizers, I suspect that they knew their intrusions, though clearly unwanted, were hard to resist.

EVALUATION

Researchers have begun to demonstrate the stigma associated with atheism (Edgell et al. 2006), document the process by which atheists experience their apostasy (Hadaway 1989, Brinkerhoff and Mackie 1993, Fitzgerald 2003), and flesh out how atheists have come to organize at the national level (Smith 2013). Though all of this research is fascinating, almost none of it is devoted to understanding the experiences of
secular parents. Pagans have also been overlooked by sociologists, with a few notable exceptions (Ezzy 2003; Ezzy and Berger 2009). Again, the experiences of Pagan parents have been ignored. Even popular writers have been nearly silent on the issue of Pagans and parenting (for an exception see the work of Ashleen O'Gaea).

While I have been able to learn a great deal about previously understudied groups, there are, of course, limitations to this study. One limitation stems from self-selection biases in the groups I studied. I wanted to observe atheist and Pagan parents, to interact with them and see them interacting with each other. However, not all atheist and Pagan parents were equally represented in the groups to which I was able to gain access. It is therefore possible that my findings do not reflect the full range of experiences of atheist and Pagan parents.

I observed atheist parents and children of atheists at four locales: (1) atheist social groups; (2) a local atheist parenting support group; (3) a workshop held by Dale McGowan, secular parenting author; and (4) a week-long summer camp for children of secular parents. The atheist social groups, tended to be dominated by childless atheists who were comfortable with debate and intellectual sparring. The atheist parenting group tended to be white, upper-middle-class, and liberal or libertarian in political ideology. Many were transplants to the Bible Belt, and many had children under the age of five. Atheist parents in these groups were also more likely to be “out” as atheists. These conditions do not characterize all atheist parents, so again there is the possibility of selection bias.
The secular parenting workshop again drew mainly upper-middle-class parents who placed great value on a therapeutic and educational model of parenting. Advertising for the workshop favored involvement by those parents who had established ties to local secular organizations. The summer camp for children of secular parents attracted a similar demographic. Parents tended to be white, highly educated, upper middle class, and “out” in their secular beliefs. Once again it is possible that a more diverse sample might have yielded somewhat different results.

Though the atheist parents I studied revealed much about what it is like to identify as atheist in the Bible Belt South, their experiences are not representative of all atheist parents. I suspect that poor and working-class parents who are nonreligious, agnostic, or atheist would be less likely to identify publicly as atheist, and also less likely to join a group that requires payment of dues and takes a therapeutic approach to dealing with one’s problems. So while the experiences of the atheist parents I studied cannot be generalized to all atheist parents, their experiences likely reflect in many ways the majority of atheist parents in the Bible Belt.

There was more racial and ethnic diversity among the Pagans I studied, though my sample still heavily favored whites (mirroring the contemporary U.S. Neo-Pagan movement membership). The main selection bias arose from my reliance on explicitly “family-friendly” Pagan gatherings to recruit interview participants. In general, Pagans are more suspicious of outsiders than atheists. It was thus necessary to find Pagans who were “out” in their beliefs, though many Pagans are not. While I do not believe self-
selection biases led to a misrepresentation of the majority of atheist and Pagan parents’ experiences in the Bible Belt South, it is important to keep in mind the limitations of any study in this regard.

Beyond sample bias, this dissertation is bound by other limits. In particular, opportunities to observe parent-child interaction were limited. Though participant observation yielded much insight into the parents I studied, this research project is not ethnographic in scope. Observations of interactions were limited mainly to public group settings and in-home interviews. The nature of the project did not allow for full immersion into the lives of the parents I studied.

Due to this limitation, much of my analysis is based on accounts. This is valuable empirical data from which theory can be and has been developed (Orbuch 1997). It is important to keep in mind, however, that accounts do not necessarily provide a clear window to reality; people can say one thing and do something quite different—with little awareness of the discrepancy (Hochschild and Machung 1989). True ethnographic studies can fruitfully examine these contradictions. This was not something I could do. Yet I was able to “triangulate,” in a fashion, by means of intensive interviewing, participating in atheist and Pagan social events, and reading what atheists and Pagans said to each other online. So while I could not observe the minutiae of everyday life among atheists and Pagans, I was nonetheless able, by drawing on multiple sources of data, to see past their accounts and at least a little way into their lives.
On a final note, even a cursory examination of the historic role that churches have played in the struggle for civil rights for African Americans in the Bible Belt should give us pause in generalizing to all races and ethnicities. The experiences of African American atheist parents might differ dramatically from the experiences of white atheist parents. The unique Black-white dynamic of the U.S. South would require that special attention be paid to the experiences of Black atheists and Pagans. This has been beyond the scope of this particular project, though would be an area ripe for future examination.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This research project is one of the first to examine the lives of either atheist or Pagan parents. As such, it can lay the groundwork for further studies of how atheist and Pagan parents cope with the perceived judgments and responses of conventionally religious others. Though it was beyond the scope of this dissertation, I believe a longitudinal study of the well-being of children of atheists and/or Pagans could be invaluable to push the national dialogue on secularization and religious pluralism in a positive direction. A longitudinal study of children seems to me to be the next logical step towards addressing the stigma directed at religious minority parents.

Another logical extension of this research would be to focus on religious minority parents of color, particularly Black parents in the Bible Belt South. To be Black and Pagan or atheist is different from being white and Pagan or atheist. Given the complex ties between African-American churches and civil rights activism, deviating
from Christianity likely holds vastly different meaning and consequence for Black parents than it does for white parents. Pursuing a line of sociological inquiry regarding the intersectionality of parenthood, race, religion, and place would fill a current void in the sociological literature.

Another possibility for future research would be an ethnographic study of atheist and Pagan families. By inserting oneself into the daily lives of parents and their children, a researcher could gain unique insight into how parents negotiate identity work and parenting in their daily lives. There is a growing interest among social scientists in how children actively negotiate family life. Ethnographic study of atheist and Pagan families would allow for direct investigation of this dynamic.

Finally, my findings and analysis can inform future research on nonreligious parents who do not identify as atheist and who do not seek support or community. Much recent media attention has focused on unapologetic atheists fighting for space in the culture or against what they perceive to be the negative effects of religion. Many Americans, however, identify as nonreligious but do not politicize this aspect of their identity. How do these parents socialize their children, presumably with little or no religion, to be morally competent actors? More remains to be learned.

The atheists and Pagans I studied felt unfairly judged by conventionally religious others who saw them as failing their children when it came to moral instruction. But of course atheist and Pagan parents want what most parents want: to raise their children—as they see fit—to be healthy, happy, successful, productive members of
society, with high moral standards. Christian hegemony can make it more difficult, however, for the irreligious or unconventionally religious to parent effectively and achieve these goals. Perhaps some of the negative effects of this hegemony can be mitigated by further study of atheist and Pagan parents' experiences, and thereby bringing to light the problems they face as parents. Looking inward from the margins, as I have tried to do in this dissertation, is often the best way to see things that are so taken for granted at the center as to be invisible.
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