



Reading: Politics, Individualism, and Atheism: An Examination of the Political Attitudes of Atheist Activists in a Canadian City

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Research Article

Politics, Individualism, and Atheism: An Examination of the Political Attitudes of Atheist Activists in a Canadian City

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Abstract

Given the growth of atheism in the Western world (including activist organizations), and atheists becoming more political, it is essential to understand the identities and values that motivate atheist activism. One avenue for exploring these identities and values is through an examination of individual political attitudes. Although the scholarship on atheist activists' political attitudes is limited, some scholars have identified the apparent growth of right-wing sentiments within the US atheist movement (LeDrew 2016). Others have identified a contentious relationship between prominent atheists' political attitudes and egalitarian views (e.g., anti-sexism and anti-racism) (Amarasingam, Amarnath, and Brewster 2016). Of those scholars who have commented on atheists' viewpoints, most emphasize the liberalism of the broader population of atheists. The purpose of this article is to examine the political attitudes of atheist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada, and highlight a core set of political attitudes and values that atheists share despite intra-movement disagreements about the relationship between atheist identity and political ideology. My findings show that some Canadian atheist activists' share a cluster of liberal and Enlightenment ideals that includes personal liberty, individualism, and an absolutist view of free expression. This article will be of interest to scholars of atheist activism as well as social movement scholars.

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Introduction

Given the expansion of organized atheism and the potential emergence of atheist politics, it is essential to understand how atheist activists conceptualize their atheist identities and relevant political attitudes and values. Consequently, this article provides insight into how a shared set core values shape some Canadian atheists' activism despite background tensions over formal politics and the direction of atheism as a social movement. Most of my participants found themselves united by significant personal attitudes and values that eclipsed their more pedestrian concerns regarding party politics. These attitudes were in turn reflected in their approaches to atheist activism and their viewpoints regarding the

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literature addressing the political views of atheist activists. Then I describe my method. The remainder of the article focuses on atheist activists' political affiliations and attitudes. I conclude with a discussion of the implications of this article and offer suggestions for further research.

Existing Research

Existing research on the religious “nones,” that is, the segment of society not professing a religious affiliation, suggests that persons in the atheist subset of this broader category are socially liberal on matters like gender roles and sexual orientation. Research looking at party affiliation, at least in the United States, also suggests liberal political leanings toward Democratic affiliation ([Baker and Smith 2009](#)). Research on secular groups in British society parallel American findings. For example, David Voas and Abby Day ([2007, 1017](#)) find that British atheists are more likely to be liberal and to the left on the liberal/conservative or left/right scale respectively. The literature, however, on the attitudes of atheists in Canada is comparatively limited. The purpose of this article is to explore the attitudes and values of a subset of Canadian atheists through a qualitative study of atheist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

The religious character of the United States sometimes dominates discussions of atheist activism, especially given the emergence of New Atheism, which is a relatively recent and primarily American cultural phenomenon and social movement ([Cotter et al. 2017](#)).² Canada may not come immediately to mind when thinking about self-conscious atheist activism, but a plethora of provincial and municipal atheist organizations increasingly represent the interests of atheists in Canada. (Although the Centre for Inquiry [CFI] is headquartered in the United States, it is the most significant atheist organization in Canada with affiliates in most provinces [Tomlins 2015]).

Although a comparison is beyond the scope of this article, parallels between Canadian and American forms of atheist activism are compelling, especially given Canadians' use of US New Atheist discourses such as those emphasizing science and more strident anti-religious stances (Tomlins 2015). In addition to contributing to the rather small literature on the politics of atheism, this article provides a better understanding of Canadian atheist activists and may serve as a starting point for future research concerning their identities and values.

Outside of Canada, the political dimensions of atheist activism also have been largely overlooked, with a few notable exceptions. Steven Kettell ([2013, 2014](#)) highlights several schisms within the US atheist movement, most of which concern the identity and branding of New Atheism and issues of ethnic, racial, and gender diversity within organized atheism. Although this work influences the current article, my primary interest is in the privately held political attitudes and values of Canadian atheist activists rather than the specific divisions that characterize the movement. For more specific commentaries regarding the political character of atheist activism, Stephen LeDrew's ([2012, 2014, 2015](#)) research is particularly relevant, because he has attempted to analyze the ideological divisions of atheist activism. He observes that the Centre for Inquiry is influenced by “militantly atheistic, self-proclaimed libertarians who employ the rhetoric of reason and free inquiry to advance a radical individualism and opposition to the state” ([LeDrew 2012, 83](#)).³ He also suggests a relationship between “scientific atheism [i.e., the Victorian discourse of an eternal conflict between religion and science] and libertarianism/laissez-faire liberalism” ([LeDrew 2012, 84](#)). Jack Laughlin (2017) adds to LeDrew's findings, arguing that a strong libertarian streak runs through atheist activism.

and Christopher Smith (2014) argue that while American atheist activists are typically left-aligned and progressive, fiscally conservative libertarians play a role in the movement (Smith 2014, 178). They also note that the followers of Ayn Rand (1905–1982) always have had a “large atheist constituency” (156). Joseph Baker and Buster Smith (2015) echo these views but primarily emphasize the cost of libertarianism for the long-term organizational success of the atheist movement (Baker and Smith 2015, 216). Despite the apparent libertarian character of some atheists, the general atheist population (at least in the US) tends to be more progressive and liberal than religious individuals.

Method

The data used in this analysis are from a larger project that used multiple methods of data collection. This article, however, draws primarily from semi-structured interviews that I conducted between 2014 and 2016 in the city of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. I fully transcribed interview data from all participants, which I then analyzed through open and then thematic coding in NVivo, a data management software package for qualitative data analysis.

I conducted thirty-five semi-structured interviews in total with participants drawn from multiple atheist organizations with a combined offline and online membership of over 1500 people. I recruited members through a combination of convenience and snowball sampling. I use pseudonyms for all my interviewees. I drew potential participants from three organizations, the Society of Edmonton Atheists (SEA), the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics (UAAA), and the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society (GESS). I selected the above organizations based on the frequency of their meetings and events, their social media presence, and their reasonable proximity to one another.

I initially began my fieldwork with the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics, which prided itself on its inclusivity and diversity, especially regarding the various identity labels one might find among the nonreligious. Some members of the group’s executive were also open to having theists participate. Despite the group’s emphasis on inclusivity, of the three organizations I studied, it was the most “atheistic,” in that participants spent more time discussing and critiquing religion than engaging in other discourses. After contacting the university group, I reached out to the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society, which maintained a robust presence on Facebook.

The president of the University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostics also was a member of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society, which eased introductions. Of the three groups, the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society was the most informal and the least focused on activism. The main event for skeptics was the infrequently scheduled Drinking Skeptically. Most conversations at Drinking Skeptically events revolved around geek culture and politics. Occasionally, someone would bring up something going on in the broader secularist community, but most discussions were off-topic. Of the Greater Edmonton Skeptics Society participants, all identified themselves as atheists, although the president did mention an interest in bringing in theistic skeptics.

I conducted most of my fieldwork with the Society of Edmonton Atheists, then the largest and most active secularist organization in Edmonton. Most of my participants belonged to multiple organizations, but many felt that the Society of Edmonton Atheists was the better organized of the three, with a greater sense of community and the primary focal point of organized activism, such as protest. Also, the Society of Edmonton Atheists had broader concerns than atheist activism alone, including the promotion of science and reason. One member of the executive spoke about how, initially, she had been an atheist,

Although the Society of Edmonton Atheists focused primarily on atheism, it provided a forum for skepticism. Additionally, the organization's events included a combination of atheist and skeptical activism. For example, alongside bus ads encouraging more people to "come out" as atheists, the Society of Edmonton Atheists organized a protest of a famous television psychic when she visited Edmonton.

My sample included sixteen women and nineteen men, ranging from ages twenty to sixty-three. The interviews lasted between sixty and ninety minutes. Roughly half of my participants primarily associated themselves with SEA, but most were involved with UAAA and GESS as well. Except for five of my participants, all the members of SEA and GESS held a bachelor's degree or higher. Twenty-nine of the thirty-five participants identified with a Christian cultural background. Two participants had grown up in explicitly atheist or agnostic households. Two participants had Muslim backgrounds, one had Neopaganism affiliations, and another identified as culturally Jewish.

Political Context

Edmonton is the capital and second largest city in the Canadian province of Alberta. According to the 2011 National Household Survey, 55.8% of Edmonton residents are Christian, and 31.1% have no religious affiliation. Although Alberta has a relatively large percentage of religious nones, the province has earned a reputation for being a conservative Christian stronghold, given that until 2015, the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party dominated provincial politics for forty-four years.

Although the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party may be thought of as right-wing, some consider it a centrist party ([Bourgault and Dunn 2014](#)). The latter perspective may be justified, given the party's general trend away from the hard-right-wing line over the years. Nevertheless, a prevailing view among my participants and some scholars is that Alberta's political culture is Conservative and populist, regardless of how adaptable the Alberta Progressive Conservative Party may be (Stewart and Archer 2000, 13). Alberta's history is replete with examples of religious influence, particularly in the political arena. Indeed, Evangelical Protestants have played a significant role in shaping the province's landscape. For example, two Albertan Premiers were fundamentalist Christians (Laycock 1990).⁴ Although Alberta is not uniquely religious for a Canadian province, its political relationship with religious conservatism has colored atheists' attitudes and their approaches to atheist activism in its major cities.

During my fieldwork, several issues influenced my participants' activism, and they were largely concerned with perceived or actual religious privilege. Most interviewees were especially supportive of Alberta Parents for Unbiased Public Inclusive Learning (A PUPIL), which is a community organization for Albertan parents opposed to religious preference in the province's taxpayer-funded school system. Also, many atheists expressed concerns about teachers' rights, especially given the parental opt-out clause in the Alberta Human Rights Act.⁵ The clause required teachers to give prior written notice to parents when instruction dealt with religion. (For a thorough analysis of contested pedagogy under the Alberta Human Rights Act, see [Gereluk et al. 2015](#)). Overlapping with my participants' concerns about the chilling effect of such constraints on teachers, several atheists worried about a repeat of the American Intelligent Design or "teach the controversy" debate in Alberta.

Although parental and teacher rights dominated atheist discourse among my participants, they had more general concerns as well, including to what extent atheists faced stigma in the province. Many atheists downplayed the stigmatization of atheists in Canada, pointing out that American atheists faced a much greater struggle. Nevertheless, my

were not “Out” as atheists, mainly because of their perception of religious conservatism in the province.

Identity Labels

Political identity labels often are opaque, and it is not always clear which attitudes and values correspond to which political identities. Nevertheless, scholars continue to rely on the left-right scale. Although the notion of “left” and “right” are abstractions, the scale does provide a framework that can allow a discussion of the political interests of individuals. In what follows, I emphasize the meanings that my participants attribute to their political identities and affiliations rather than any “objective” criteria of liberal/conservative or left/right. Similarly, I make no judgments about my participants’ more fine-tuned categorizations such as “socialist” and “Marxist.” Nevertheless, I do take for granted the literature suggesting some correlational relationship between left/right descriptions and some traits and behaviors, e.g., the tendency for liberals to score higher for openness to experience ([Haidt and Joseph 2009](#)). To the extent that atheists understand their political identities, their use of labels suggests, at the very least, their preferences for programs such as their support for left-wing parties that tend to set more progressive taxes and be more motivated by collective incentives.

Throughout both formal interviews and informal conversations, the question of the Enlightenment emerged somewhat organically from questions about my participants’ political leanings. My interviewees typically defined the Enlightenment as a series of narratives that emerged during the eighteenth century that emphasized liberalism, progress, and rationality. Given my participants’ atheism and their focus on science, they tended to highlight the a-religious or anti-religious thrust of the intellectual movement over other narratives. Many atheists were concerned about modern challenges to the products of the Enlightenment, including values such as free intellectual inquiry and individual rights. This concern about attacks on the legacy of the Enlightenment was wrapped up with participants’ conceptions of the political spectrum. Many identified as “liberals,” but with caveats, often distinguishing themselves from “social justice warriors” (or SJWs), a phrase they used to describe political radicals and those they thought of as engaged in counterproductive identity politics.⁶ For example, Raj (age 33) lamented the rise of identity politics both within and without the atheist movement:

I think we should be making decisions based on reason rather than identity. Admittedly, sometimes there’s an overlap, but this ongoing effort to put people into boxes is divisive. That’s what I think about when it comes to the left. It used to be the case that being a liberal meant upholding certain values that went beyond a person’s group identity. Now, everything is emotive and tribal.

Although Raj was perhaps more articulate about his political views than some other participants, participants’ responses to political questions are suggestive of a general hostility towards identity politics.

Although my participants never provided a clear definition of identity politics, their primary concern was with what they saw as its “evangelical” character, using the term as a pejorative label.⁷ For example, Sean (age 34) linked identity politics to feminism, and feminism to religion:

[Identity politics is] kind of religious, you know? There’s a concerted attempt, even within [local atheist organizations] of demanding what essentially amounts to a purity test. Are you an ally of this or that group? Have you thought seriously about your privilege? Everyone has original sin, especially if they’re born white or able-bodied, or if they’re a male. Why can’t we just be atheists? I think that should be

My participants' concerns about identity politics, a phrase equally as challenging as any of the political terms interviewees used, do not appear to be unusual. Landon Schnabel et al. (2016) point out a contradiction at the heart of atheist discourse: although atheists are typically more liberal than the religious on social issues, they nonetheless express hostility towards some forms of social justice (which they sometimes conflate with identity politics), suggesting the existence of cultural beliefs that perpetuate inequality within the movement. One possible explanation of this contradiction, at least among a small sample of Edmonton atheist activists, is that despite my participants' preferences for a "liberal politics," they prioritized a core set of values that were at odds with this more progressive form of politics. For example, many of my participants used words and phrases such as "individualism" and "independence" when describing their worldviews as a way to distinguish themselves from those engaged in identity politics. Their focus on these values may not be consistent with group goals (e.g., social justice and equity).

Political Affiliations

Previous American research on the political affiliations of secular groups found that atheists were more likely to self-declare as independent with Democratic leanings (Baker and Smith 2015). Marcus Schulzke (2013) argues that New Atheism itself is a liberal doctrine and that it follows a "well-established style of liberal political theory" (Schulzke 2013, 789). Even though most research points to atheists as being liberal and progressive (Cimino and Smith 2014), some scholars suggest that the New Atheism movement is not progressive, and, in fact, many atheists may hold neo-conservative positions. For example, Stephen LeDrew (2013, 2015) emphasizes the role of libertarianism within the movement, that is, the normative political theory that prioritizes freedom of choice over other values.

Although no comparable data exists for the Alberta context, I did find some consistency with findings that atheists tend towards left-wing political views. All my participants identified as "left," or "liberal," and most identified with traditionally left-of-center political parties, including the New Democratic Party (NDP), the Liberal Party of Alberta, the Alberta Party, and the Communist Party. I mention the political affiliations of my participants because those affiliations were important to them, especially given their view that left-wing parties were more pro-science than right-wing parties. As one participant said, "Reality has a well-known liberal bias," highlighting some atheist activists' positions concerning the political spectrum. Below, I briefly describe each party.

The NDP is a social democratic party with historic ties to organized labor and the political left in Canada. A year into my interviews, on May 5, 2015, Alberta had a provincial election, with the Alberta NDP upsetting the incumbent Conservatives. Some of my interviewees claimed to support the NDP because they wanted an alternative to the long-reigning center-right Conservatives. Most, however, claimed to support the NDP because they saw it as the province's only pro-science party, especially when it came to climate change. Other reasons for their support included the party's historical support of human rights.

My participants were politically active in the months leading up to the NDP victory, but they claimed that political discussion and debate had long been an important component of the Edmonton atheist community. Although NDP supporters were overrepresented in my interview sample (18) and among my informal participants, several participants (5) supported the Liberal Party of Alberta, which they regarded as either a centrist or center-left party. The remaining interviewees expressed interest (without commitment) in some minority parties, including the centrist Alberta Party and the left-wing Communist Party. Some participants thought of the Alberta Party as occupying the space between the NDP and the conservatives. Early in its history, however, the Alberta Party expressed often

a provincial branch of the Communist Party of Canada and positions itself against transnational corporations, promoting a platform based on socialist ideas. Although some of the self-described Marxists in my sample expressed solidarity with the Communist Party, they thought the NDP would be more successful in mainstreaming their views. Many of my remaining participants either gave no party affiliation, planned a protest vote (e.g., against the provincial Conservatives), chose not to reveal their party affiliations, or were non-voters. Regardless of their party affiliations, most of my participants identified with the left-wing of the political spectrum.

Despite their use of labels such as “left” or “left-wing,” six interviewees explicitly expressed some sympathies towards what they called “small ‘l’ libertarianism.” One such participant, a self-described “socialist,” claimed to have “some things in common” with libertarians, given that he saw socialist and libertarian thought as anti-authoritarian. Despite such comments, my participants’ cautious affinity for some forms of libertarianism did not play a significant role in determining their party support. In other words, although some atheists may have had some appreciation for libertarian arguments, they still voted for left-leaning parties like the NDP. For example, Pat (age 34) described himself as having “classically liberal tendencies,” (using classical liberalism and libertarianism interchangeably) and yet, he also self-identified as a long-time NDP supporter.

Some participants identified as socialists, Marxists, or communists. One participant even described the NDP as an “essentially communist party.” These kinds of declarations were not the norm. Instead, most interviewees expressed ideological affinity with “social democracy,” a kind of catch-all category for their general appreciation of Scandinavian welfare states. For example, Bonnie (age 39) described herself as a social democrat, praising Sweden for its education system and high levels of happiness:

Scandinavian countries like Sweden seem to be happiest countries in the world. I understand that they invest a lot of money into health-care, education, and basically being kind to one another. I think we could use some of that here, not that Canada is bad or anything, but I still think Canadians are inherently conservative.

Despite some common-ground among self-described social democrats in my sample (for example, their agreement about the apparent success of Scandinavian social democracy), most participants had difficulty explaining their ideological inclinations. Nevertheless, there were some standard positions across interviewees.

Most of my participants were critical of contemporary forms of globalized, neo-liberal capitalism, and were supportive of redistributive taxation and regulation of the economy. All my participants also held socially progressive positions, advocating for gun control, LGBTQ rights, reduction of race inequality, and access to abortion. Although I found significant overlap in political positions, many atheists were hesitant to associate themselves with a political ideology, and mainly they emphasized the social dimensions of politics over fiscal issues, especially when discussing their differences with other atheists. For example, Connor (age 27) did not feel comfortable talking about economic issues with other members of the community:

I don’t really understand economics very well. Mostly, I just find it boring, but I would describe myself as left-wing. I know there’s problems with the left-right spectrum, but [political quizzes] always put me somewhere on the libertarian left. I think it’s because I’m radical when it comes to stuff like abortion. Like, I think it should all be legal, prostitution, drug use [...] if you’re not hurting anyone.

references to “equality of opportunity,” and their commitment to “freedom of choice”:

It all comes back to equality, doesn't it? Equality of opportunity. We don't have that. I know that I'm privileged and that impacts how I view the world. In practice, being on the left means being against discrimination and unfairness and being for individual human rights, freedom of choice, fairness, and helping each other out (Liz, age 44).

When I asked my interviewees how they saw themselves concerning other atheists, they emphasized their worries about ideology, schisms, and fragmentation in the community. They expressed an outsider-based, anti-system ideology consistent with the “herding cats” analogy, that is, they expressed wariness about local and national organizations and even the existence of an “atheist movement.” For example, Sienna (age 21) said that while she identified with the left, she was concerned about the impact of ideological labels within atheism:

Most atheists either want to keep their politics to themselves or they're run-of-the-mill centrists. Maybe we're center-left, but only slightly. But our loudest people are SJWs. They want to control the conversation, and this is going to sound ridiculous, but they're in danger of turning atheism into a religion. They're not just concerned atheists or people who care about helping others. They want to spread a collectivist feminist ideology, and that's religion in my opinion.

Sienna's reflection on ideology and what she referred to as the “team sports” of identity politics, is consistent with a general trend across participants, in the sense that frequently they highlighted the importance of independence and autonomy in their decision-making. The influence of feminists on local atheist politics also played a major role in how my participants positioned themselves. Given some controversies about the emergence of Atheism Plus (A+), they were perhaps aware of the importance of distancing themselves from the faction as well as any form of feminist atheism ([Amarasingam, Amarnath, and Brewster 2016](#); [Lee 2016](#); [Simmons 2017](#)).⁸

The term Atheism Plus refers to “spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to promoting social justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside of the atheist community” ([Beaman and Tomlins 2014, 65](#)). Although Atheism Plus no longer has much of a presence within the atheist movement, many atheists affiliated with the faction continue to argue that the atheist community perpetuates inequality, has a “sexism problem” and that it is an “old boys' club” ([McCreight 2011](#)). Most of my participants were hostile towards Atheism Plus and affirmed their individualism over the faction's emphasis on identity politics.

In summary, this section provides an overview of the political affiliations of atheists and some of their concerns about ideology. In the next section, I describe the core values that were important to all my participants (i.e., they mentioned these values most frequently in interviews and they came up frequently during my fieldwork). The values are personal liberty, freedom of speech, and individualism.

Personal Liberty

All my participants valued liberty, which they variously described as “personal freedom,” the ability to act as individuals, without interference, and with emphasis on holding and expressing views that others might deem controversial or offensive. Some participants distinguished between positive and negative liberties, the former referring to the opportunities that individuals have available for fulfilling their potentials. They described negative liberty as freedom from external constraints. My participants mainly saw

distinguished between the two types of liberty as follows:

Positive liberty is about entitlements. It's about handouts. It's never-ending. That's what SJWs want. They want everyone to be given what they want, and they have no problem taking from others who earned their keep to give it to them. Negative liberty means that no one is going to stop you from acting. That's as close as we get to freedom. Positive liberties are more intrusive.

Most interviewees reflected on liberty as it related to their political lives outside of atheist activism; that is, they expressed a desire to keep their broader beliefs and values separate from their atheist activism, or they desired a more politically neutral (or at least politically diverse) movement:

Being an atheist doesn't mean anything outside of 'I don't believe in God,' but I've seen some attempts to unite us under a political identity. I'm not interested in that. Who I vote for and my political viewpoints are my business. If I choose to share them, cool, but I don't like it when [members of the executive] just assume I'm on board with their values (Trevor, age 28).

Some participants saw local atheist organizations as biased political entities, and they deliberately censored themselves given their perception that SJWs (particularly feminists) were, as one participant suggested, "taking over the movement" by demanding that members support social justice causes and engage in some form of identity politics.

Freedom of Speech

Closely connected to the value of liberty, my participants overwhelmingly supported freedom of speech, with many atheists describing themselves as "free speech absolutists." Although some participants were hesitant to discuss their views concerning liberty, they were not so timid when it came to advocating for free expression. They emphasized that free speech should include the "freedom to offend" and, outside of incitement to violence, most atheists were highly critical of attempts to curtail free speech, even if such speech turned certain members off from participating in the community.

Some participants made references to the expansion of "Orwellian speech codes" and were concerned about the growth of political correctness in Canadian society. Others talked about "left-wing authoritarianism" and the "regressive left," just to name a few key phrases familiar to the online atheist community. Max (age 22) expressed concern about the regressive left. The phrase regressive-left originates with Maajid Nawaz' memoir, *Radical, My Journey out of Islamist Extremism* (Nawaz 2012, 201) in which he applies the label to those on the left who seek to immunize Islam against criticism. Max had the following to say about the phrase:

The regressive left is basically in favor of censorship and shutting down free speech because they see themselves as politeness advocates. So, it's basically okay to stop people from speaking because they might offend someone. It's not that big of a deal in the atheist community, but [the regressive left] is having an impact here. You can't really criticize Islam, for example, or people will accuse you of being a racist. That has a chilling effect. We're only allowed to complain about Christianity, and that's it.

Although Nawaz had a specific usage in mind, pointing to self-described liberals who held illiberal principles, several participants extended the concept to refer to those on the left who were influenced by postmodernism, cultural relativism, and for whom freedom of speech had become just one value among many. For example, Maisie (age 26) felt

since abandoned that element of its politics in favor of “postcolonial guilt.” With these last two examples, my participants may be indirectly expressing their hostility towards the social sciences and humanities. As LeDrew (2015) argues, recent trends in atheist activism tend to equate the social sciences with postmodernism and relativism (LeDrew 2015, 74).

Beyond their concerns about the regressive left and political correctness movements, all my participants felt that their atheism and the atheism of others depended on free expression, which they saw as under threat because of a decreased tolerance for offense-taking. For example, Richie (age 38) said that people don’t have the “right to not be offended,” and he was particularly concerned about how religious groups might co-opt political correctness movements to increase their privilege in public spaces. Igor (age 34) had similar concerns, especially given what he saw as increasing threats to free speech on campuses:

Maclean’s [a Canadian news magazine] had a piece on how most universities in Canada fail when it comes to free speech. Everyone wants safe spaces now, and they can’t tolerate controversial ideas. If free speech isn’t working on campuses, how is it going to work anywhere else?

Igor was not alone in his concerns, and many atheists felt that some members of local atheist organizations were slowly giving ground to concerns about offense-taking, such as inviting speakers who had a record of attempting to get members of the community disinvited from atheist conferences.

Individualism

Often, philosophical discussions of atheism have emphasized the importance of the Enlightenment with its values of individualism and human reason. When asked to describe the Enlightenment, my participants overwhelmingly identified with these values as well as others, placing emphasis on reason and truth, privacy and individualism, free expression, and critical thinking.

In practice, my participants expressed their appreciation for Enlightenment values in several ways, the most potent being claims about the incompatibility of religion and reason, which other scholars have addressed in some detail (Lee 2017). More relevant to this article, my participants expressed a strong pro-science worldview, frequently mentioning the scientific method and skepticism. Marcus Schulzke (2013) argues that New Atheists tacitly defend a political liberalism that emphasizes religion’s threat to liberal values. My findings are consistent with this tacit liberalism in that often my participants discussed the fact that religion is a threat to freedom of expression.

Many participants saw the individual as the basic unit of social analysis, and often they focused on the importance of individual choices and responsibility. Paralleling this emphasis on individualism, many atheists expressed skepticism of collective plans and goals. Although they thought their actions had social significance, they emphasized the largely private dimensions of their atheism. Consequently, they often downplayed the importance of atheist organizations. For example, Sasha (age 31) claimed individualism was a strength of the atheist community:

We don’t really engage in groupthink. This is going to sound egotistical, but we’re not followers. Many of us have really had to struggle to leave religion, to turn away from our families and friends, and leave our communities. It’s easy to do that in Canada, but I suspect that all atheists have a contrarian streak in them, and that makes them weary of groups.

hubs rather than ideological authorities. Also, they expressed reticence to engage in activities that resembled religious activities, e.g., community-building events such as Sunday Assembly, which mimics the communal experiences of a church for the non-religious. For example, Connor (age 27) felt that some atheists wanted to make atheism a form of religion-lite:

A lot of people leave religion and then as soon as they find an organization they go right back to their bad habits. They want to feel like they're part of something and that they can maybe find some comfort in the community. But, it's exactly that inclination that leads to all sorts of problems. It's like people who go from one relationship to another. They don't know how to be alone. I don't have a problem with people getting together to do something, but there's something very dangerous and seductive about this emphasis on community.

Despite their involvement in atheist organizations, many of my interviewees like Connor and Sasha had reservations about what they variously described as “organized atheism,” the “atheist movement,” or “New Atheism.” For example, Raj (age 33) thought atheists were “natural libertarians” because of their reticence to “join up” due to their concerns about control or oppression from larger organizational bodies:

Think about it, you grow up in a religious community that is designed from the ground up for coercion, to keep you in your place. When you escape from that, I think it's natural to be skeptical of anything that resembles that. Maybe we take that too far, which is why we're not very organized, but it's a hard thing to get away from. Religion doesn't care about the individual. If you're the peg that sticks up get hammered down.

Not all my participants shared Raj's views. Among atheists who identified as socialists, a communitarian ethos played an important role in their lives, even as they acknowledged that organizing other atheists was like “herding cats.” They desired more of atheist community, to both fulfill their desires for social change and to replace what people lose when they leave religion:

I think being an individual is an important component of being an atheist, but I don't think it's exclusive to atheists. A lot of geeks are individualistic. A lot of programmers [...] have that individualistic focus. But I still think we can have some sense of community, if it's voluntary and accountable (Sean, age 34).

Regardless of how they conceptualized their individualism, most of my participants preferred organic and informal social groupings and were skeptical of collectivism, community, and organization, perhaps mirroring the “spiritual-but-not-religious” discourse on privatized experience. For example, many of my participants associated their individualism, at least in part, with freeing themselves from dogma and authority structures. Sam (age 31) was adamant about “making a difference” on his own, free of the “messiness of organizations.” Trevor (age 28) talked about the do it yourself (DIY) ethic of the atheist movement and avoiding “collectivist bullshit.” Despite his strong words on the matter, many shared Trevor's distastes for attempts to push the movement in a specific direction.

Despite my participants' embrace of a radical individualism and their skepticism of organizations, they were not apolitical or selfishly motivated. Rather, they practiced a form of lifestyle politics, living the ideals that they envisioned, such as pursuing what I refer to as a rational life. This rational life included desires and passions, as well as an intellectual repertoire grounded in the notion that the methods of science should not be

humanistic ethic that embraces the power of human reason and rejects supernaturalism (see [Cimino and Smith 2007](#) for a discussion of this worldview). Although anyone may embrace these beliefs and principles (i.e., the lifestyle), just as one may be a vegan without being a vegan activist, my participants embraced this lifestyle as their primary means of effecting social change.

Conclusion

The empirical analyses within this article represent a significant contribution to scholarly research into the political attitudes and values of Canadian atheist activists. Although the participants included in this study represent only a part of the total atheist activist population in Canada, my findings show that some atheist activists in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada hold political affiliations consistent with previous research showing that atheists tend to be ideologically left. My findings also provide important support for atheist activists' libertarian emotional dispositions and social preferences.

Despite their left-wing political affiliations, my interviewees shared a more individualistic and less communitarian ethos, which placed them at odds with social justice efforts within the broader atheism community as well as what they perceived as a pronounced turn toward identity politics within the atheist movement. In particular, my interviewees emphasized Enlightenment and liberal values such as personal liberty, freedom of speech, and individualism. Their emphasis on individualism and suspicions regarding identity politics is consistent with libertarian rationalism, which places emphasis on difference concerning identity construction and radical individualism (LeDrew [2015](#)). The results I have set out here invite other scholars of atheism to further investigate the political attitudes and values of atheist activists and to perhaps refine classifications of atheists' ideological commitments and policy preferences.

Notes

1. Although New Atheism's emergence, as a set of philosophical and political ideas, is associated with the United States, my interviewees were heavily influenced by the New Atheist literature and the activism that emerged from these ideas._ [↑](#)
2. My participants viewed New Atheism as a social movement rather than a subset of broader atheist activism._ [↑](#)
3. Libertarians are skeptical of the state and are typically opposed to government intervention in free markets._ [↑](#)
4. William Aberhart (1935 to his death in 1943) and Ernest Manning (1943 to 1968)._ [↑](#)
5. The NDP Alberta government (which I describe later in the article) has since removed parental opt-out consent for subjects of a sexual or religious nature in classes. The previously governing Conservatives initially implemented the parental opt-out clause in 2009._ [↑](#)
6. Identity politics refers to organizing around the collective identity of a given group. My participants, however, emphasized identity visibility and allyship as central to identity politics (see Singh [\[2015\]](#) for an analysis of identity politics)._ [↑](#)
7. My participants often used "fundamentalist" as a pejorative as well, disconnecting both words from their technical meanings and associations. Often, this misuse of evangelical and fundamentalist was intentional._ [↑](#)
8. Within social movement studies a faction typically refers to a subgroup within a larger social movement that conflicts with other members of that movement._ [↑](#)

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