

The article by Jesse Smith addressed how atheist identity is formed through social interactions. While previous research has found that social processes reward religious identity that conforms to cultural normative beliefs, this research demonstrated the other side of the coin by addressing the religious identity that opposes them. Smith conducted in-depth interviews with multiple atheists, from which he identified the four stages of atheist identity development: ubiquity of theism, questioning theism, rejecting theism, and coming out as atheist. As atheist identity is secular by nature, it reminded me of the secularization theories.

The first stage specified by Smith especially reminded me of Berger's sacred canopy theory and process of secularization. Berger argued that religion acts as a sacred canopy, providing an explanation of life and validating social norms. This aligns with how the majority of people in the United States believe in the existence of God and legitimizes the religious practices that many people engage in when growing up. The religious references, such as God, in politics establish a ubiquitous experience of civil religion for the people in the United States.

The second stage, questioning theism, reminded me of another aspect of Berger's theory: how modernization and rationalization contributed to the privatization—and ultimately the secularization—of religion's public influence. Atheists represent a very small population and their identity alone doesn't fully capture secularization at a societal level. However, Berger's idea of rationalization leading to secularization aligns closely with how many atheists began questioning their beliefs. As they matriculated to universities and embraced rational thinking grounded in science and reason, many atheists reevaluated and distanced themselves from their previous religious beliefs.

In describing the third stage, Smith argued that atheist identity is fundamentally shaped by the rejection of theism. This can connect with the observation by Edgell et al. that dominant

groups often view minority groups as deficient in moral codes and more inclined to disregard civic norms. In other words, the dominant groups view moral codes based on rejections as inadequate. However, I personally believe that moral codes can emerge from rejecting existing systems of belief. For example, certain Christian moral principles, such as "do not kill," are framed in terms of prohibitions. Smith also pointed out how atheists not only reject the religious and spiritual narratives, but also the social and institutional narratives in American culture. This was very different from non-affiliated people, who no longer engage in the religious practices, but still have cultural and social connections to their religion in their everyday life. Lastly, Smith mentioned that atheists who come from particularly strong religious backgrounds tend to have greater feelings of acrimony toward religion. This adds an interesting layer to the theory about strict religion being strong. The theory studied the effect of strict religion on believer's faith, but it did not study the effect of strict religion on the believers who turned into non-believers.

The fourth stage reminded me of reading about ex-Mormon experiences. Their descriptions of the devastation they felt following their apostasy were profound, with much of their suffering rooted in the loss of close social circles. This made me wonder about the social networks of atheists: do atheists actively distance themselves from their religious acquaintances, or do their friends reject them first, similar to ex-Mormons? Do atheists face similar feelings of alienation, or does society's emphasis on science and reason provide them with validation to fill the void left by religious institutions?