

Introduction

The famous French sociologist David Émile Durkheim once said, “God is society, writ large.” Could this still be true for a society without god? Can atheists be considered a religious group?

Religious groups celebrate holidays, have rituals, and often common clothing. Religion is about bonding with others. In this paper I hope to demonstrate that atheism is indeed a religion.

I show how atheists draw upon holidays and rituals from pop culture and mainstream religions. I covered the concepts of bricolage, and syncretism to prove that atheists are indeed a religious group. Modern Atheists pick and choose their own rituals and customs. Instead of church shopping, atheists pick and choose customs that fit their life. Atheism is religion with no god.

I conducted research to prove my argument. I began by attending one of the UGAtheist group’s meetings. I provided a thick description on the meeting. After attending the meeting I conducted an interview.

Methods

Inductive research methods used include observation, interview and secondary research. At first I was unsure what group to conduct research on. While reviewing a list of University of Georgia student organizations, the UGAtheists group stood out to me. I then searched for their group online. I found an incomplete website that linked me to the group’s official Facebook page. UGAtheists now also go by the Secular Student Alliance which is also the name of their Facebook group. On the website I saw contact information for the group. I emailed the representative telling them I was conducting research for my anthropology of religion course, and I asked when they hold events. The representative told me they would be glad to have me at any of their weekly Monday meetings. She also told me they have a special event for Halloween, a speed-friending event. I decided to go to the special event.

Meetings were held in the Miller Learning Center room 274. They occurred every Monday at 6:15 PM. After the hour long meeting, most of the group members walk together downtown for dinner. We went to Yummy Pho on Broad Street.

While at the event, there were about 12 people. Half were male and half were female. Noticeably, all members where white. One member was also from England. 11 of the 12 members were students between the ages of 18 and 22. One male member was a UGA employee attending with his brother. The UGA employee worked for EITS and is 25 years old. 3 officers were female and 1 was male. Many of the members come from religious background. Some had atheist families.

After the meeting, I joined their Facebook group. I then asked who would like to be interviewed for my project. I told them the interviews were anonymous. I got a few phone numbers and decided who to interview.

I decided to research syncretism and bricolage. The even I attended was a playful twist on a popular holiday and method of dating. I also saw on their Facebook group, previous holidays from popular culture they celebrated. I tried to target an officer to interview. I believe they would have the best understanding of the organization and would most likely be members for the longest.

After attending the event and conducting an interview, I conducted second hand research. I used the two textbooks from class. I also searched for more resources using google and google scholar.

“Thick” Description

The Secular Student Alliance hosts regular meetings every Monday at 6:15 PM in the Miller Learning Center. I decided to attend a meeting on October 29, 2014. I arrived early at 6 PM. Three students were present. They were officers in the student association. All three were women. The treasurer, president, and the vice president. All three were wearing their organization’s shirts. The shirts were red and written on the shirts were Secular Student Alliance. On the shirt was also a tea kettle. Below the tea kettle was an equal sign.

I introduced myself to the officers wearing their group’s official clothing. They were excited to have me present. The officers told me that they take the group very seriously. They

sometimes have trouble with new members who think the group is a joke. They were glad that I was doing an ethnography on them for my Anthropology of Religion course. They explained to me that sometimes they feel discriminated against on and around campus. “UGA is the in the Bible belt,” one of the officers shared, “Christianity is main stream here. We are definitely an underrepresented minority.”

I was curious about the symbolism on the shirt. “Why red? Why the equal sign? And why in the world is there a tea kettle?” I asked myself. The officers were glad to explain. Red is for love and passion. They are proud to be atheists, agnostics, and everything in between. They explained that they long felt ashamed for not being Christian like their peers. Red also stands out in a crowd. They were finally able to come out in a public way and proclaim their lack of a belief in a supreme deity or deities. The equal sign stands for equality. They believe that they should be treated just as equally as all other religious groups on campus. The tea kettle is a reference to Russell’s teapot. Russell’s teapot is also known as the celestial teapot or the cosmic teapot. It is an analogy used to describe the backwards logic used by theists in the eyes of atheists.

Slowly the room filled with more people. Including myself, fourteen people in total were present. There was an equal representation of men and women in the group. The President delayed beginning the meeting from 6:15 PM to 6:30 PM. She was not pleased that half the attendees showed up late. She told the group that even though they all like to have fun, they want all members to show up on time. She stood in front of the group. The room we were in was a standard classroom with long tables arranged with chairs. She stood at the podium where a teacher would normally stand. She went through group announcements. She expressed satisfaction with how the corn maze event went the previous week. She also announced that she would be holding a potluck at her house on Wednesday. She then asked everyone to volunteer to bring food. She instructed the members to post what they would bring on the official Facebook group.

After announcements, she instructed all of the members to sit around one of the long tables in the room. The day’s event was a speed friending exercise, a playful twist on speed dating. Each group member rotated around the table and was given one minute to talk to each other about anything on their minds. We all rotated around the table one by one. When the President’s iPhone alarm went off, the rotation call was singled and we meet the next person.

By the end of the event, about 20 minutes later the President realized that we all rotated around the table but we did not all meet each other. “Our math was wrong,” she proclaimed. Talk to anyone you haven’t meet with yet. The organized rotation then became a social free for all as we walked around the room and introduced ourselves to the remaining members.

After so many ice breakers, the objective of the exercise was achieved. We all felt like equals. We all felt like friends. We all felt like a group. Even as an observer, I felt very comfortable in the group.

The President than asked the group where we should go for good cheap dinner. After taking suggestions and casting votes, the group decided on Yummy Pho downtown. We all walked as a group from the Miller Learning Center to the restaurant on Broad. On the way there, all students avoided walking under the arch.

When we arrived, we all pushed the individual tables together to make a large group table. At the dinner, we all waited for everyone to get their food before eating. There were no prayers. We broke bread (literally, most of us ordered sandwiches or soup with bread) and had an enjoyable social hour. Many group members explained that they enjoyed being able to meet regularly with likeminded individuals. Each individual came from varying backgrounds: some had extremely religious upbringings, others were raised atheist. They all felt lonely in a Christian dominated society. One member explained, “It was said when I came to the realization that I was an atheist. I felt alone in my mind in this world. This group gives me the opportunity to feel like I belong to a group again without god being central to the group.”

I asked them if they had any central texts that they deem important to their group unity. They said they had no Bible, but many of them enjoyed reading physics and philosophy. They drew their cosmology from modern texts and science instead of ancient superstition and tradition.

On the way back to campus, the students once again avoided walking under the arches. I am surprised that a group which prides themselves on rationalism still uniformly follows popular superstition. We all talked in the large oak tree located next to the philosophy building. I then split ways and walked home as the Secular Student Alliance continued their trek back to campus.

On the way back home, I reflected on the process. I had a lot of fun with the Secular Student Alliance. They were a very open group. I got to know them all very quickly through their activities. They truly felt like a family. I was also surprised to see a lack of religious

bashing. Instead of bonding the group by despising a common enemy, the group bonded on similar life experiences and fun activities. All members expressed a feeling of loneliness that the group resolved. The Secular Student Alliance is a group that anyone can join without feeling judged by how far along they are in their religious journey. They are all lost souls clinging together in an empty world. I may consider going native. I got a few group members numbers. I will conduct a phone interview over the weekend.

Analysis

Before meeting with the Secular Student Alliance, I was perplexed about the concept of Atheism as a religious identity. Are Atheists antisocial loners? Well no, they are human just like us. They bond with others, maintain social ties, and enjoy community. The Secular Student Alliance presented an obvious solution to the lack of community and loneliness felt by many atheists I meet. Many of the members left behind a community along with their faith. But there were still two questions I held close to heart and on the forefront of my mind: What symbols do they hold close to heart? What holidays do they celebrate? Growing up Catholic, the power and presence of religious iconography was omnipresent. Catholics have rosaries, crucifixes, statues, etc. Almost every day of the year is a holiday marked as a day dedicated to a Saint. How can people leave behind such power pendants of religious life? Well, once again the Secular Student Alliance easily solved my conundrum. I added these questions to my interview and Chris was glad to share.

The Secular Student Alliance playfully takes on symbols and holidays from popular culture. The UGAtheists are true bricoleurs.

“The term *bricolage* has been widely adopted within anthropology to refer to the creation of symbolic structures from a variety of culturally available symbols” (Bowie 70).

Bricolage is known to be a playful adaption of symbols. Their group T-Shirts alone contain three great examples: 1. The red equality sign. 2. The teapot. And 3. The plate of spaghetti.

I asked Chris to explain these symbols to me during his interview. He was glad to share the origins of these eclectic images with me:

The red equality sign comes from the LGBTQ community. It represents equal marriage. The Secular Student Alliance adapted the symbol for their own use. They use it to represent equality in religious beliefs, including a lack of religious belief.

The teapot is a reference to Bertrand Russell's teapot. The Russell's teapot is a popular argument about burden of proof. In short, say I am a devotee of a religion that believes there is a flying teapot in space. I ask people to disprove me. Because no person could disprove there is not a flying teapot in space, the teapot must really be there. This is indeed a logical fallacy. An inability to disprove existence is not a valid proof of existence. Bertrand Russell's argument places the burden of proof on religious groups to prove their beliefs, instead of placing the burden of proof on nonbelievers to disprove a religion.

Finally, the spaghetti plate most indeed is a playful symbol. The plate of spaghetti is a symbol of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monsters (FSM). The Church of FSM also is known as Rastafarianism, an amalgam of pasta and Rastafarianism. Pastafarianism is a popular movement among atheists. The Church of FSM is a religion that mocks other religions, particularly Christianity. Members often identify as Pastafarians/Atheists. Members have lobbied lawmakers to accept colanders as religious headgear and to include the flying spaghetti monster in religious statues and parades.

"Syncretism – Greek *syn* = 'with' and *krasis* – 'mixture.' The mixing together of two or more elements" (Bowie 252).

Religions tend to take on practices from neighboring religions. The Catholic Church is a well-known religion full of syncretism. The Catholic Church in Latin America adopted many religious practices as their own in the New World (Bowie 253). The Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico, under the influence of the Catholic Church became synonymous with the Virgin Mary (Bowie 255).

Similar to the early Catholic Church, the Secular Student Alliance celebrates holidays originating from the dominate religion that surrounds them, Christianity. In the Bible Belt, Christianity's presence is undeniable. Instead of rejecting the popular Christian holidays, the UGAtheists are adopting them. They celebrate Halloween. Halloween is the eve of all Saints Day, a Catholic holiday. They also celebrate Easter and Christmas, holding secret Santa and secret Easter gifting events. Even though, they do not believe in the birth and resurrection of Jesus, they celebrate the popular secularization of these quintessential Christian Holidays.

The Secular Students also celebrate holidays recognized by the University of Georgia. They held a potluck for Thanksgiving over the Thanksgiving break. The members went to a corn maze over fall break. They also hold a party celebrating the end of each semester.

The Secular Student Alliance celebrates holidays. The Secular Student Alliance has religious symbols. The Secular Student Alliance is a community bonded by their religious beliefs. Was Durkheim correct? Is society god, even if the society does not believe in god?

I do believe Durkheim was correct. Society is god. God is religion. The UGAtheists are a religious organization. Although they do not have a god or gods, god exists as the society for secular students as the Secular Student Alliance. Even Chris agreed, "Yes. Atheism is a religion in the Anthropological sense described by Durkheim. I have symbols I share with atheists. I celebrate secular holidays. And I am a member of the group."

Personal Reflections

I come from a religious family. Both my parents attended Catholic universities. My father attended Catholic school his entire life. Growing up, I went to Mass every Sunday. Dating an Atheists would not please my parents.

I was raised under the impression that atheists were godless heathens. Based on my parents' stereotype, they party, do drugs and deny Christ. I personally thought atheists as loners or scientists. They were witches on the fringes of society or conducting research high up in an ivory tower. Regardless, I assumed they were asocial and generally smug.

I was surprised to meet an organization of Atheists on campus. The idea of bonding over not believing in God was odd to me. I believed there was no history, no doctrine, and no purpose.

I had trouble conducting second hand research. The UGAtheists/Secular Student Alliance are a local organization. They are not nationally unified or organized. Each atheist lives life their own way. It is hard to speak about a group as diverse as Atheists. They do not have an agreed upon book of worship, holidays. They simply don't believe in God.

My lesson learned is to write papers earlier. I always procrastinate. I did not start this paper until the week before it is due. I should have begun writing the paper over the

Thanksgiving break. I also learned that atheists are people too. They have feelings, morals, and fun. My stereotypes were completely wrong.

Works Cited

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