

Organized Atheism Creating Community

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Abstract

Comprising less than ten percent of the United States' population, atheists are a minority, although their presence on the national sociopolitical stage has recently increased through the efforts of organized atheism. This increased visibility has attracted the attention of sociological research, but no published studies focus on a single group of organized atheists. On the campus of Luther College, a small, private liberal arts college affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, atheist students are again the minority. Not only are the majority of students affiliated with some religious tradition, but most campus-wide events, traditions, and organizations incorporate elements of a Christian tradition. One of the few exceptions to this religious foundation is the Secular Student Society (SSS), an organization founded for and by atheist students. These students define themselves by negating religious beliefs and traditions. While many students bond over commonly shared identities affirming religious traditions, a small number of students that participate in the SSS's weekly meetings seemingly have in common only an identity that negates traditions. On what basis do these students build community? What motivates these students to build this community? What does the SSS do for those students? The author hopes to answer these questions by analyzing recorded meetings from October 2013 through February 2014 and in-depth interviews with each participant. Based on preliminary results, the students of SSS build their community around a shared experience of religious ostracism from the rest of society, an exclusion made more intense by the Christian symbolism present in many Luther campus activities. For these students, participation in the SSS offers moral support as well as a place to express themselves freely through humor and frustration pointed at theists on campus and more broadly.

Keywords: atheism, community, values

1. Introduction

Since the late nineteenth century, scholars have understood culture to be expressed in either "magico-religious systems"¹ or "secular" institutions.² If these categories are mutually exclusive, atheism fits in neither. Atheism is often understood as negating belief in God or negating religion, yet the Supreme Court of the United States accorded "secularist," a broad term encompassing atheism, legal status as a religion.³ Since anthropology began, religion and the expression thereof has been an object of study,⁴ and scholars continue to express the value of studying rituals concerning supernatural from a rational perspective.⁵ Studies of religion often focus on what organizing or collective identity formation does for a sample of the participants. With a small national population size, atheists are ideal for study.⁶ Increasingly, studies of religion have turned to atheism to understand both ongoing changes in the American society and why people organize, finding that atheists seem to organize to pursue a goal or to gain support for their beliefs. These studies begin to see atheism as a kind of collective identity formation system not unlike religions.

One scholar recognized that any study of "secular," which includes atheism, "always involves, by definition, the notion of religion."⁷ Atheism is assumed to be the antithesis of religious belief and absence of religious practices,

but what is religion? Often, research on atheism passes over the problem of definitions, conflating religion with belief⁸ or theism.⁹ In anthropology, the following definition, written by Clifford Geertz, has been widely used:

[R]eligion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.¹⁰

Because it “includes experiences, rituals, traditions, and community,”¹¹ this definition grounds religious practice in the rest of an individual’s life. With a similar emphasis on community, Saler traced the meaning of the word “religion” to Latin-speaking authors like Cicero, who used *religio* to mean “‘tying together’ or ‘to bind,’”¹² thinking that Cicero may have found religion in activities that bound people into communities. Yet more recent anthropological analyses of religion have concluded that definitions similar to Geertz are erroneous:¹³ “There cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes.”¹⁴ Asad continues that beliefs attendant to the Christianity of Western Europe are the origin for the concept that religion is definable. Thus, studies that do not define “religion” are not clear about their theoretical foundation, leaving the reader to potentially misinterpret the authors.

Since scholars dispute the definition of religion, let us turn to scholar’s attempts to define atheism. Similarly to various people, “atheism” has meant a variety of behaviors and beliefs. Historically, ecclesiastical authorities gave the label “atheist” to intellectuals refusing to acknowledge clerics’ or religious institutions’ authority or to people refusing to participate in religious activities.¹⁵ Some atheists affirm other beliefs in the place of the existence of a supernatural entity, including “I believe all humans’ essence is ethical.” Because such statements do not explicitly negate anything and rely on scientific or mathematical support, they are called “positivistic” perspectives. Positive atheist ideologies include adherents to Humanism¹⁶ or Sam Harris’s “secular spirituality.”¹⁷ Other positivistic atheists are almost militantly anti-theist.¹⁸ Smith suggested that most atheists move through a period of anti-theism while affirming their new identity as atheist.¹⁹ In an interview, religion scholar John Dunn belligerently said, “[A]theism is the belief that there’s no reason why you shouldn’t do whatever you’re reasonably confident you can get away with.”²⁰ “Atheism,” then, is not a monolithic label but instead represents many different variations of belief.²¹

Because the total atheist population in the US is very small, it is both attractive to researchers and difficult to study.²² Atheists, “rare in normally studied populations,”²³ are frequently grouped with people without affiliation to religious organizations. Estimates of the percentage of the atheists in the US range from 0.2%²⁴ to 4%²⁵ of the adult population, but all studies conclude that people not traditionally religious comprise over 10% of the US’s adults.²⁶ In many studies, the US population seems very religious in comparison to other industrialized Western nations, but US adults may also over-report their religious participation by fifty percent or more.²⁷ Although the size of the American atheist population is debated, studies on atheists almost always try to include the entire population.

Studies on the average characteristics predictive of an atheist have suggested some common demographics. Most frequently, atheists tend to be relatively wealthy adult males with at least a high school diploma, but more often with at least an undergraduate degree.²⁸ Studies debate whether institutions of higher education have a long-term effect on religious participation.²⁹ Most atheists aren’t married but may be cohabiting with another person, and few have children.³⁰ Studies disagree about the average age and ethnicity of the atheist population,³¹ so these are insignificant.

The average American atheist, thus, seems to live a life without wants. Yet, atheists join groups organized to offer supportive community³² for a variety of reasons. Many atheist organizations use the discourse of other marginalized groups, such as ethnic minorities or GLBTQ activists, co-opting their discourse of identity politics to lobby for group recognition, rights, and equal treatment.³³ Atheists seek support networks to protect against discrimination by a public that, since the Cold War, has conflated atheism and communism.³⁴ Other research suggests atheists may organize to counteract fears of losing ethnicity,³⁵ to recreate systems of authority in the face of crises of meaning,³⁶ to find legal support,³⁷ and to spread “ideals of scientific rationality.”³⁸

The subject of this study, the Secular Student Society (SSS) at Luther College, is affiliated with the Secular Student Alliance (SSA), a national umbrella organization for secular students. The SSA works with over four hundred affiliated chapters with a 85-90% retention rate, in part because the students self-select these organizations.³⁹ Although each affiliated organization has its own agenda, specific to its university, college, or high school, the SSA’s mission is to provide these local chapters with resources themed for Pastafarian and nontheist traditions.⁴⁰ Cimino and Smith found that atheists struggled with the transition into a stigmatized identity,⁴¹ so the SSA hopes to help local secularists become more confident in their identity. Jessika Griffin, SSA Regional Campus

Organizer to Kentucky, Illinois, and Indiana, had 35 affiliated chapters in her region when interviewed; the majority of the groups met once a week for discussion.⁴² The SSS behaved similarly.

Atheists create communities by organizing themselves into groups of people with common values, beliefs, and experiences. Researchers study atheists and their organizations to understand moral communities and the dynamic US population, yet no one has taken this question directly to the individuals of one group. Also, no study exists that has studied atheists who live, perhaps incongruously, on a religiously affiliated campus. This study begins to fill that gap in knowledge by digging into the thought processes behind the students' choices. The study found that the Secular Student Society during academic year 2013-2014 was a safe space for members to find support and challenging the hegemony of theism at Luther College.

2. Methodology

This exploratory study is an ethnographic examination of a student organization during one academic year, 2013-2014. The focus of this study was the Secular Student Society (SSS), a student-run organization recognized by Luther College of Decorah, Iowa. The researcher's relationship with the subject group began in August 2013 and continued through May 2014 in email, text, and face-to-face communication. During this period, the total population of the SSS was six self-identified atheists. This paper defines "atheism" as the belief that there is no supernatural entity or god.

From late October 2013 to mid-May 2014, the researcher collected data through weekly meetings and in-depth interviews. Each meeting was held for roughly an hour and was vaguely organized around a discussion topic. The researcher conducted individual interviews with each participant separately from the meetings. The interviews were conducted using a loose conversational format structured around two questions. Why does each participant prioritize attending the meetings of the SSS? What are common values and beliefs held by the participants? All of the prepared questions were intentionally open-ended, and in each interview the discussion shifted to an area of the participants' interest. The researcher recorded the audio from meetings and interviews with her laptop for a total of 11 hours and 2 minutes of data.

The researcher transcribed each audio recording, noting the frequency with which topics entered conversation. Soon larger themes appeared into which the conversation topics were grouped. If more than ten conversations over the study period touched on a theme, the researcher determined that theme to be significant. The researcher compared the significant themes from meetings with the participants' interviews to find the implicit rationale behind the choices made by the SSS participants. The researcher relied on inductive reasoning. The researcher augmented such reasoning by finding the beliefs held in common among SSS members, defining "common" by two or more individuals either agreeing to a perspective addressed in a meeting or separately expressing the same perspective in an interview. The researcher informally double-checked the reasoning with the SSS students after presenting the research to her college in May 2014.

The researcher's role as a participant observant changed the study's data. For instance, in late October 2013 the students conducted formal introductions. The students, led by John⁴³, the president, teased the researcher about being the "odd one out" by momentarily sitting on the opposite side of the room from her. This temporary seating arrangement was a statement of solidarity among the atheists against the researcher, since she was an outsider as the sole senior, anthropology major, non-atheist, and the researcher. As a participant, she often brought to the meetings topics for discussion. Nonetheless, the perspectives of the individual participants of the SSS shaped the researcher's understanding of the group.

3. Luther College

Luther College is a small, private liberal arts college located in Decorah, a small town in northeastern Iowa. Approximately three-quarters of its students come from Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin, 82% of the student body identifies as "white/Caucasian," and there are 20% more women than men.⁴⁴ As its name suggests, the college is affiliated with the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America and actively states, "faith matters at Luther College."⁴⁵ Theism permeates the activities on campus from the worship service that formally opens each semester to the devotions that prepare ensembles for concerts. A brief study of the college's mission statements showed that, while secularization has affected the college, Luther College still retained ties to its history as a male-only pre-seminary institution.⁴⁶ One of the few studies to focus on religion in colleges and universities suggested a positive correlation

between student bodies with a majority of white and/or female populations and the frequency of participation in religious activities.⁴⁷ Data from Luther College's student body of 2013-2014 supported the study's results.

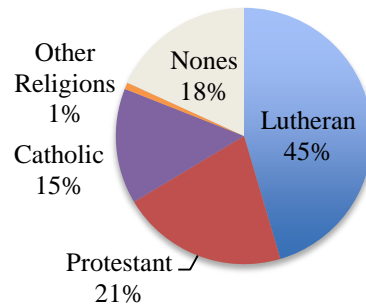


Figure 1. Religious affiliations of Luther College students.⁴⁸

The total student body at Luther College was 2 519 people for the 2013-2014 academic school year, when the data was collected on the SSS. From this data, 18% of Luther College, or 454 students, do not affiliate themselves with an organized religious body. These students are part of a sociological category called “nones,” which includes atheists, agnostics, spiritual adherents, secularists, humanists, and people who simply choose no category. Although sociologists have determined the percentage of US adult atheists to be 0.2-4% of the US adult population, Luther College's lack of detailed data leaves us without knowing the total number of atheist students on campus.

4. Collectively Constructing Community

The four founders of the SSS⁴⁹ intended “to encourage discussion between secularists and basically the rest of campus.”⁵⁰ This dialogue⁵¹ has been continued through the period of study. In SSS meetings, the participants expressed their common values and beliefs, together creating a common experience; they proceeded to bond over these commonalities. The students all valued critical inquiry as a form of engaging the world. They valued learning. They believed morality is separate from religion or a supernatural entity. They had negative experiences that reaffirmed their atheist identities. They frequently returned to certain topics: (a)theisms, ethics, and community. Conversations filled with anecdotal stories, bouncing the interlocutors between their present and past activities, creating bonds unique to the SSS meeting space. By building a common experience around their values and beliefs, the students cooperatively constructed a space wherein they could express an ideological narrative challenging the hegemonic theist culture of Luther College.

4.1. (A)Theisms

Discussions of both atheism and theism occurred more frequently than any other theme's discussion, with the students returning to this theme on average eight times per meeting. The participants engaged in logical analysis of religious traditions, reflected on their nontheist identity, mocked quoted studies, sarcastically enacted Biblical stories, and sympathized with each other's experiences within the dominant theist culture. Their conversations around atheism and theism provided community bonding. The students discussed traditions as varied as Pastafarianism, Rastafarianism, Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, astrology, humanism, Ouija Boards, and New Atheism, focusing most of their discussions on Christianity and forms of secularism. In his interview, James reminded the researcher that:

It's kinda fun finding that, although religious views might be the same, [perspectives] can be drastically different. Which, we've always known is the case for like, like, religious people, but for non-religious it's *just* the same thing. We're *just* as varied. (December 2013)

James reaffirmed his different opinion while defending interfaith discussions. When emailing with the researcher, one of the founders of the SSS wrote, "[W]e had many discussions on other religions, death, Pascal's wager."⁵² Discussing religion and the secularists' relationships thereto has long been significant in the SSS's conversations.

John's background helps elucidate this significant theme's role in creating a collective identity. John came from a Lutheran background where belief defined identity. He began questioning theism after taking advanced classes in high school taught "to get people to open their minds to new experiences" (December 2013). Seeking atheist and theist arguments, he moved through stages of militant nontheism before settling into agnostic atheism as a high school junior. In his interview he emphasized critically engaging people and traditions:

I think the day that I stop being open-minded is going to be a very dark day indeed. I see that as a very important part of who we are: learning new things, gaining new experiences, becoming better people. I think as soon as we stop trying to do that, we lose a very critical part of who we are. (December 2013)

As he is president of the SSS, John ensures that the meeting is relaxed and open to new ideas and perspectives. Once, John initiated an analytical conversation about creationists' use of arguments:

I do rhetoric..., and I think it's brilliant, how the Creationist movement has discredited evolution. Like they've done it so effectively that...people will just dismiss the idea that people came from monkeys...It's just been brilliantly done. (November 2013)

In the discussion that followed, the participants opened themselves to learning from a different belief tradition. James defined the participants' attitude in such discussions: "my lack of belief is just as valid as their belief" (December 2013), an attitude that closely matches the basic approach to academic conversation at Luther College.⁵³ Using a tone set by John and their classes, the participants bonded over critical engagement of (a)theisms.

Half of the SSS's conversations did not use James's relativistic attitude and instead found atheism superior to other beliefs. The students often pointed sarcasm toward other groups. For example, the first time someone cited a Gallup poll from 2010 about creationism,⁵⁴ Courtney, Gretchen, James, and John immediately mocked the Biblical creation stories. As the students who participate in the SSS agree in their distaste for Creationism, the group accepts, and even promotes, such displays of emotion.

The participants of the SSS reflected on their identification as non-theists several times throughout the meetings as well. When the five participants conducted formal introductions in October 2013, John and James explained the continuum of atheism to theism used by the group, establishing definitions for common use. In November, they examined their definition of atheism after a guest lecturer at Luther College had argued that atheism posited certain beliefs.⁵⁵ James, Jess, and John discussed the lecturer's argument, critiquing her understanding of atheism.

JAMES: [W]hen you start proscribing general belief statements to atheism, you get a little wonky. Cuz it's not really, like, atheism's not really like a philosophy. It's not really, it's not *religion*. It's not really *belief*, it's just kind of, the, the lack of believing in a god. I don't really—

JOHN: Yeah. It's not that we share one premise, it's that we don't share a premise. That everyone else does. (November 2013)

Here, John and James define atheism as "the lack of belie[f] in a god." Regardless of whether a person believes in supernatural, s/he is an atheist as long as s/he holds that particular belief. For the young men, the lecturer's definition of atheists as having unified positivistic beliefs made her argument weak.

The students insist on giving themselves opportunities to investigate different religious traditions and to reflect on their own religious identity or lack thereof. These discussions express one of the group's common values – learning. With their common emphasis on learning, the students distinguished themselves by actively working to understand the phenomena around them. All the participants have prioritized learning for many years, one reason they attend Luther College. Twins Courtney and Gretchen left high school with over thirty-two college credit hours each, implying that their curiosity pushed them past their high school's opportunities. After attending half of a meeting in March, Libby found the meeting's emphasis on discussion "very interesting" (March 2014). Her prominent role in Luther College's elite academic club, Mock Trial, had precluded her from participating in the SSS earlier in the year. The students critically analyzed theories, statements, and actions of people, enacting their value of learning.

4.2. Philosophers of Ethics

Continuing with the theme of engaging ideas from various traditions, the participants often talked about morality, exploring their personal ethics as well as comparing themselves to their peers and the broader nation. John, James, and Courtney also discussed morality in their interviews. The SSS dedicated an entire meeting in March 2014 to collectively establish a moral code acceptable to each participant. Consistently, the students wholeheartedly espouse the belief that morality is separate from a religion or supernatural entity. As when discussing (a)theisms, the students' conversations about morality included frustrated outbursts.

Morals became a topic of conversation in an October meeting, as a discussion about how the Gospels have been reinterpreted over generations used the Biblical story of angels visiting Lot in Sodom to illustrate how Christian society has defended homophobia and reinforced of patriarchal heteronormativity. The discussion about reinterpretations turned quickly into a diatribe against the moral code displayed by the characters in the story.

JAMES: [A mob]'s like, 'Let [the angels] out because we want to know them' and then [Lot] goes and gives them his daughters instead.

JOHN: Because that's so much more moral.

COURTNEY and GRETCHEN: (Laughs)

JAMES: 'Let me give you my virgin daughters instead of these angels.'

JOHN: 'I'm going to protect...these random people who came to my house; take my daughters instead. Because I am a moral person.'

GRETCHEN: 'I don't want them anymore.' (October 2013)

In this discussion, the students do not find the hospitality displayed by the host in the story acceptable ethically. Also, three students take on the persona of Lot, the host, sarcastically voicing their parodies of what he was thinking. By analyzing and mocking the story the SSS participants verbally challenge moral codes defended by Biblical interpretations, together finding these ethics valueless.

The participants' common interest in morality extends beyond their personal experience; they also bonded over ethical philosophy. As part of John and James's extended discussion of a guest lecturer's argument, John defined deontological, arêteological, and teleological approaches to morality. He finished by reflecting on the appropriate moral code for atheists, "I, I find it very hard, or I find it very *weird* for an atheist to have an approach other than teleological one" (November 2013). James primarily listened, as these definitions were new to him. Explaining the ethical options, John displayed the depth of his knowledge and critically engaged the options. John and James agreed that atheists can be moral without religion, but atheists are limited to the teleological approach.

As discussions of morality also involved mocking the adherents of other views, the group implicitly agreed that to be accepted in the group, a participant must discard the belief that religious institutions are moral authorities.

JAMES: The thing is, they [sermons] are important moral lessons. It's like, most of the sermons are important moral lessons, they are in almost no way like strictly religious...I don't know if it's a Lutheran thing or not. But most of them are like actual life lessons.

JOHN: Actually, I'd argue that our society has adopted religious ideals to the extent that we can't really tell them apart anymore.

JAMES: Mhmm.

JOHN: Like, the way that Western society is set up, it's so inherently Christianized. Like, you can, you can have them teach a lessons that's like, 'Oh, hey, this isn't a religious lesson at all,' when in reality, that's, that's what it is. It's just become a major norm.

JAMES: They just, they just take the religious buzzwords out of it. It's still from the Bible, it stems from a religious lesson –

COURTNEY: And that's why everybody says that atheists don't have morals. (November 2013)

While there are atheist movements to reinvent the idea of church so that atheists have access to the life lessons and a collective of human wisdom,⁵⁶ the SSS collectively posited that atheists could learn about morality without church. Thus, James's defense was unilaterally attacked. He quickly rescinded his opinion and conformed to the opinion of John and Courtney. By changing his statements, James included himself in the common opinion of the group.

4.3. A Collective Community

As in other studied communities, the SSS's conversations defined boundaries for inclusion to the group. The participants' anecdotes explicitly defined their identity as separate from the majority theist culture. When the author corresponded through email with one of the founders, he replied to the stated research question by immediately writing, "A less pleasant commonality [among participants of the SSS] is the exclusionary experiences some atheists have experienced...[The SSS] is a safe place to vent, discuss, and ask for ideas on how to interact with the uncle who won't stop emailing you unwanted [B]ible verses."⁵⁷ In other words, he experienced the group as a cushion against negative experiences and a springboard for positive experiences – a supportive community. Likewise, the students of this year's SSS created a common positive experience within meetings, constructing the SSS as a respite from the negative experiences had elsewhere. In the current academic year's conversation, students bonded over the common experience of being an American atheist.

In particular, the stories of negative experiences focused on the storyteller's emotional reaction to their experiences in religious institutions or organized activities. The SSS participants referred to groups both on and off campus in these stories. Some of the stories off campus occurred before graduating from high school, some of them happened when the students return home on breaks, and some experiences were only anticipated for the future. In each story, the emotional response was feeling awkward. The students implied that they felt little space to critique or behave differently from others when disagreeing with the base premise underlying the activity. The students bonded further over offering each other space to express their negative experiences among religious populations.

While all students have had negative experiences with religious institutions, a few stories defended religious institutions as either neutral or even good for humans. For instance, James sees church as having benefits that he, even as an atheist, can access by continuing his practice of attending his hometown church during breaks: "I still stand by the [idea] that 'Church is a really great community'" (December 2013). Even though such stories expressed a different relationship than John and Courtney to their home congregations, all shared equally in the common experience of the SSS meetings.

Each student transitioned from an identity as theist to become atheist, and as such, each student has a history of participation in organized religion, particularly worship services. In October 2013 when Courtney said that she and her sister had been Catholic, Gretchen and John commiserated over their common theist past. In his interview, James remembered that his high school youth group, a place of more personal discussion and in-depth analysis of Biblical stories, didn't feel right to him, a realization that spurred him towards atheism (December 2013). These negative stories from the students' past are reminders of why the students felt alienated in their initial traditions. Stories of the students' experiences, like their discussions about morality and (a)theisms, served as catalysts for analysis and sarcasm as well as providing areas over which the students bond as a community.

James may feel excluded or marginalized more than the other SSS members because he lives a double life as an open atheist at college and a closeted atheist at home. As such, James chooses particular contexts in which to publicly affiliate himself with atheism and atheist groups so as to avoid stigma. On the one hand he said, "I'm an Eagle Scout; you can't be an Eagle Scout and be an atheist at the same time... they can still kick you out" (October 2013). James cited this fear when relating why he puts his Eagle Scout, but not his participation in the SSS, on his resume (February 2014). On the other hand, he is aware of how other secularists' behavior reflect upon him: "I still cringe if – that, like, you're representing me, don't, don't, like, represent me poorly" (November 2013). By specifically choosing the context in which he can present himself as atheist, James actively avoids negative experiences as a marginalized atheist.

The SSS participants are aware that they, along with other atheists and agnostics, are considered “outsiders” because they do not adhere to the majority’s ideologies.⁵⁸ The students test this perception by separately continuing their experiences with religiously affiliated organizations on and off campus as well as collectively reviewing past experiences of religious organizations. Meetings of the SSS allow the participants space to collectively reaffirm their identities as atheist, finding support from the other atheists.⁵⁹ Their positive experiences reinforce their common values of engaging other people’s ideas and learning and their common belief that nonreligious people can be moral, in order to create the common experience of sharing time and space with each other in the weekly meetings of the Secular Student Society.

5. Conclusion: A Common Challenge

James and John comprised the core of this year’s Secular Student Society, yet James and John held different beliefs. For instance, James believed in accepting differences between theists and nontheists, while John not infrequently expressed anti-religion sentiments, identifying himself with the New Atheist movement. In the meetings of the SSS, however, these two were not alone in the project of constructing a community. Courtney, Gretchen, Libby, and the author played roles in the meetings’ direction as well. Nonetheless, the six students who participated in the SSS connected over common values, beliefs, and experiences.

The lax structure of the meetings allowed conversation to meander to whichever topics the participants wished to discuss or were most comfortable discussing. As such, the topics of the meetings often returned to three broad themes of (a)theisms, morality, and community. The participants discussed the religious traditions present in campus activities, in their classes, in the world at large, and they reflected the same level of engagement with their own non-theist identities. They considered themselves moral people with the ability to distinguish right behavior from wrong action, and they spent time discussing how best to be moral atheists. Intertwined with their discussions were implicit affirmations of their atheist identities as separate from the dominant theist ideologies. The students engaged their topics through logic and reason, also expressing emotions like sarcasm or amusement. Though not every participant came for each meeting, most expressed continued interest and commitment to their weekly meetings’ discussions.

The heterogenic students cooperatively created an identity separate from, and somewhat opposed to, the hegemonic Christian theism of Luther College. The SSS participants shared the value of engaging traditions through critical analysis, which often meant that the theist traditions around them were critique or mocked. By believing in a separation of morality from religion, the students positioned themselves in opposition to many theists. By having awkward experiences among theists in religious settings like worship services, the students reaffirmed their identities in opposition to the majority. Through discussing their individuality and bringing their perspectives to the fore during SSS meeting discussions, the students shared their dedication to and bonded over common values and beliefs, creating a common experience for themselves as participants of the Secular Student Society.

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