

THESIS

RELIGIOUS ENVY: INVESTIGATING THE NONRELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

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Theories of religion identify certain benefits that religion uniquely provides. Furthermore, there is evidence that non-religious individuals not only miss out on these benefits but are penalized for and discriminated against due to their lack of religious affiliation. For these reasons, when non-religious individuals engage in social comparison, they may experience envy toward religious individuals related to the benefits of religious affiliation and the consequences faced for being religiously unaffiliated. This study aims to investigate “religious envy” in the lives of religiously unaffiliated individuals within the United States. Four individuals (ages 22 to 30; three women and one man) who identified as atheists and endorsed experiencing religious envy were interviewed, and transcripts were analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This analysis developed four domain topics: perceptions and beliefs, previous experiences, religious envy, and reasons for staying nonreligious. Twenty-one themes formed a basis for understanding the phenomenon of religious envy. Themes within the “Religious Envy” domain indicated that participants experienced envying religious individuals due to a perceived sense of community or belonging, coping with grief or loss, existential comfort, and a sense of ethical or moral certainty. This study identifies specific ways that nonreligious individuals may experience religion and its role in their lives and beliefs. Furthermore, this study provides a small amount of exploratory evidence for the existence of religious envy as a phenomenon.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

People affiliated with organized religion or religious traditions make up 84% of the world's population (Pew Research Center, 2017). The sheer popularity of religious affiliation worldwide indicates that individuals must experience the benefits of affiliation and a religious belief system.

To clarify what is meant by “religious affiliation,” it is necessary to define religion and differentiate it from spirituality. Hill et al. (2000) identified that the experiences arising from a search for the sacred/divine/Ultimate Reality/Ultimate Truth are essential pieces of religion and spirituality. However, Hill et al. also identified that religion, unlike spirituality, requires both a context in which the search for non-sacred goals (like identity, meaning, wellness, social support) accompanies the primary goal of a search for the sacred and a methodology of that search that is supported by an identifiable group of individuals (2000). From this definition, it is clear that religion has a fundamental characteristic of organization and group identification. Individuals can identify as spiritual regardless of their identification or non-identification with a religious organization. Therefore, religion has a personal dimension of orientation to the sacred and a social dimension of organization and shared identity. This organization and shared identity distinguish religion from spirituality, which pertains only to the personal dimension of orientation to the sacred.

The term “religious affiliation” will be defined as self-identified affiliation with a religion or religious group within the proposed study. There are no other requirements (such as regular attendance at religious services). The terms “nonreligious” or “not religiously affiliated” will be used interchangeably, defined as the self-identified lack of affiliation to any religion or religious

group. Group identification is the essential distinguishing factor between religious affiliates and religious non-affiliates.

Benefits of Religious Affiliation

Given this understanding of religion as an orientation towards the sacred and social identity, one may anticipate both personal and social benefits of religious affiliation. However, it is essential to note that the social dimension of religion leads to some distinct research challenges. It is difficult to identify social benefits unique to religious affiliation separate from social benefits from affiliation that could exist outside of religious contexts. In *Beyond Belief*, Mackay notes that separating the benefits of religion from the benefits of a stable community or other therapeutic practices that occur in religious settings, like meditation or music, is an exceedingly complex task (Mackay, 2016, p. 28). Furthermore, there is consistent empirical support for the well-being benefits of social support and community participation (e.g., Chu et al. 2010; Kawachi & Berkman, 2001). This empirical support indicates that some of the relationships between well-being and religious affiliation may be mediated by social support.

According to a survey of research on religion and health outcomes across various nations, most studies on the subject identify significant positive relationships between religious involvement and mental or physical health outcomes (Koenig et al., 2012). Two-thirds of the surveyed studies reported that religious people experience more positive emotions, fewer emotional disorders, more social connections, and live healthier lifestyles than less religious people. Religious individuals are also physically healthier (Koenig et al., 2012). Religiously active people tend to smoke and drink less, and individuals from the United States who regularly attend religious services live longer on average (Pew Research Center 2019a).

Psychological Benefits of Religion

The General Attribution Theory of Religion, posited by Spilka, Shaver, and Kirkpatrick (1985), identifies the unique psychological functions of religion, suggesting that religious systems provide affiliates with a framework for explaining events and providing sources of meaning. According to this theory, belief in religion gives people a lens that structures their views of the world—a global meaning system (Hood et al., 2018). According to the General Attribution Theory of Religion, religious systems provide various ways to increase feelings of control and self-esteem, such as through prayer, a moral code, and faith in a higher power (Spilka et al., 1985).

The General Attribution Theory of Religion's driving force is our desire to understand why things happen and what things mean. These psychological functions of religion are closely related to Terror Management Theory (TMT). At the broadest level, TMT is a theory about why and how we manage existential fears. Terror Management Theory suggests that the desire to understand why things happen and give meaning to events is due to existential anxieties.

Terror Management Theory (TMT) highlights unique psychological aspects of a religious worldview, such as anxiety management, that one may consider desirable. According to TMT, the knowledge of mortality creates anxiety and affects behavior (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). TMT proposes that people need a system of anxiety buffering that offers a sense of self-worth and meaning in the face of the awareness of mortality. This need gives rise to protective strategies such as defending one's cultural worldview, self-esteem, self-worth, and sense of meaning in life (Juhl, 2019). A meta-analysis of the past 20 years of TMT research empirically supports this theory. Presenting individuals with reminders of their mortality (also termed Mortality Salience) has been repeatedly shown to increase defense of and striving towards various self-esteem and cultural worldview variables (Burke et al., 2010).

Within the TMT framework, religion is understood as a mechanism of buffering against existential fears. It is especially well-suited to handling existential anxieties by providing affiliates with a path to symbolic and spiritual immortality (Vail et al., 2019). Anthropologist John Beattie (1966) asserted that religious organizations, beliefs, and practices allow individuals to face overwhelming dangers. Furthermore, Beattie noted that these institutionalized means of coping with overwhelming threats are morally and emotionally comforting (p. 235).

According to TMT, when individuals participate in their society's prevailing cultural worldview, they have access to a path to symbolic immortality by developing a legacy that will exist after death. Religious belief systems "are primarily oriented toward the pursuit of supernatural immortality...all religions function similarly to offer a reassuring promise of spiritual immortality, helping humans cope with the awareness of their eventual creep toward the grave" (Vail et al., 2019, p. 262).

Social Benefits of Religion

Hood, Hill, and Spilka (2018) reflect the functionalist perspective in *The Psychology of Religion*. This sociological perspective outlines both the tribal foundations of religious organizations and the functional aspects of religion. The Functionalist Perspective of Religion views religion as a force for social unity and a way to maintain community ideals, a perspective most notably contributed by Émile Durkheim (Durkheim, 1995). Furthermore, the social perspective views religious moral doctrines as coordinating and unifying principles that promote prosocial behavior and intragroup trust. The social function of religion includes enhancing social belonging, promoting group unity, providing positive social evaluation, serving as a marital and reproductive selection process, and creating punishments for behavior deemed immoral (Hood et al., 2018).

There is good evidence supporting the social benefits of religion. Frequent churchgoers report more extensive social networks, more contact with network members, more types of social support received, and more favorable perceptions of the quality of their social relationships (Ellison & George, 1994). Overall, people active in religious groups tend to be happier and more civically engaged (Pew Research Center, 2019a), though this is untrue in some countries. Furthermore, there is evidence that religious belief can provide social and psychological support when coping with personal death anxiety and experiences of bereavement (Norezayan et al., 2009; Sherkat & Reed, 1992; Vail et al., 2012; Vail & Soenke, 2018; Van Tongeren et al., 2013; Wilkinson & Coleman, 2010).

One's sociocultural environment seems to play a significant role in the psychological benefits of religious affiliation. While there is conflicting evidence on whether the relationship between religion and psychological well-being is consistent across all cultures (Francis et al., 2003; Francis et al., 2004; González-Rivera et al., 2019; Lewis & Cruise, 2006; Yorulmaz, 2016), religious affiliates consistently exhibit psychological well-being benefits in countries where religiosity is a social value (Gebauer et al., 2017; Koenig et al., 2012). A *social value* is a value that occurs when groups determine that something is worth preserving and that it is something important enough to warrant transmission to future generations (Avrami et al., 2000).

According to the Religion as a Social Value (RASV) hypothesis, religious individuals feel good about themselves in cultures that value religiosity (Gebauer et al., 2012). There is strong evidence that the RASV hypothesis explains much of the cross-cultural inconsistency in the relationship between religious affiliation and well-being. The RASV hypothesis suggests that religious individuals in societies that highly value religion feel pride in their alignment with the social value, which increases self-esteem and well-being. A set of replication studies found

strong support for the RASV hypothesis while ruling out many possible explanations by including covariates at the individual and sociocultural levels. Sociocultural religiosity moderated the religiosity-esteem relationship at the local, state, and country levels. The sociocultural motives perspective on personality indicates that people with certain personality traits (such as high agreeableness) are more likely to follow ambient sociocultural norms. After controlling for the variation in the Big Five personality traits, sociocultural religiosity as a moderator of the religiosity-esteem relationship remained statistically significant (Gebauer et al., 2017). Clearly, being religious in a religious society is related to social and psychological benefits.

There is theoretical and empirical support for religious affiliation's psychological and social benefits. These comparative benefits are in relation to nonaffiliates, logically indicating that there are drawbacks to being a nonaffiliate.

Consequences of Being Unaffiliated

Especially in societies that value religion, religious affiliates enjoy social and psychological benefits from this sense of being valued. On the other hand, religiously unaffiliated individuals experience negative social and psychological consequences.

Non-religious individuals in societies with religiosity as a social value face discrimination and are treated with lower levels of trust and respect than their religious counterparts (Edgell et al., 2006; Oslon & Li, 2015; Starova et al., 2013). In religious countries, non-religious people report being treated with less respect than religious individuals (Starova et al., 2013). Atheists are viewed as less moral and less trustworthy than religious individuals, and existential concerns (such as being reminded of death) contribute to anti-atheist sentiments (Cook et al., 2015; Gervais & Krueger, 2014). In a set of studies conducted by Gervais et al.

(2011), a broad sample of Americans (from both Canada and the United States) found the description of an untrustworthy individual to be more representative of atheists than of Christians, Muslims, gay men, feminists, or Jewish individuals. The only group with comparable levels of distrust was rapists. Atheists are among the least liked and least trusted individuals in many parts of the world (Edgell et al., 2006; Gervais et al., 2011).

In the United States, atheists are viewed as threats to moral values and elicit greater moral disgust than other groups, such as gay men and Muslims, that may be perceived to pose threats to “values;” this view is associated with prejudice against non-religious individuals (Cook et al., 2015). The significant rise in non-religious identifying individuals in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2015) has not seemed to reverse anti-atheist prejudice (Gervais et al., 2017).

Envy Towards Affiliates

Non-religious individuals are aware of the discrimination, prejudice, lack of trust, and even disgust that they are treated with compared to their religiously affiliated counterparts. Others’ negative perceptions are empirically supported sources of distress for non-religious individuals (Weber et al., 2012). Perceived discrimination has consistently been negatively correlated with mental and physical well-being (e.g., Pascoe & Smart Richman, 2009). It seems highly plausible that discrimination and inequity are linked to feelings of envy in non-religious individuals. In this paper, *envy* is defined as “an unpleasant, often painful emotion characterized by feelings of inferiority, hostility, and resentment caused by an awareness of a desired attribute enjoyed by another person or group of persons” (Smith & Kim, 2007).

Feelings of envy arise from social comparison and subsequent perceptions of inferiority or deficiency. These perceptions lead to conclusions about one’s relative social standing and self-concept (Festinger, 1954, Smith & Kim, 2007). Higher self-reported perceptions of inferiority

are associated with feelings of envy and negatively correlated with self-esteem (Appel et al., 2015). This correlation seems especially relevant in instances of social comparison between an individual who fits with a community's social values and one who does not. A sense of injustice seems to contribute, at least in part, to feelings of envy (Smith et al. 1994).

I will be using the term “religious envy” to indicate envy towards religious affiliates for desired attributes related to religion and religious affiliation. Envy directed towards religious affiliates and the religious experience is a new and relatively unexplored concept in the literature. It has been chiefly explored in memoirs and essays as opposed to empirical research. In a rare exception, Hermen Kroesbergen investigated the existence, amongst both religious and non-religious people, of envy towards others with higher levels of faith. Specifically, Krosebergen discussed anecdotal experiences in which Christian theology students noted their envy and admiration for the “dedication” and “steadfast devotion” they perceived in Muslim individuals (Kroesbergen, 2020).

Dr. Michael Krasny reflected upon his status as a non-religious individual in the book *Spiritual Envy: An Agnostic's Quest*. He described his experience of “spiritual envy” as the ...envy of the consolation of faith, of the elevating power of knowing a force or forces beyond the physical, observable world or past the finite limits of self, of knowing a higher purpose, or possessing answers, or even being convinced they can be discovered. To have answers and certainty, to possess spiritual anchoring or spiritual authority and purpose, is to have comfort, a release from the entrapment of life's suffering (2012). Throughout the book *Beyond Belief: How We Find Meaning without Religion* (2016), Hugh Mackay points out many benefits that individuals can enjoy when they are part of a religion and the negative feelings that can arise when unaffiliated individuals reflect on religious affiliation.

He noted that many non-religious individuals yearn for something to believe in and quotes many individuals who express envy towards religious individuals.

McKay also discusses the negative experiences that individuals may have when they disaffiliate from their former religion. These experiences include feelings of guilt, loss of structure, missing the comfort and reassurance of rituals, the community, the music, the opportunity for quiet reflection in a meditative atmosphere, or the good people they encountered at their places of worship (Mackay, 2016). These feelings indicate desirable aspects of religious affiliation that no longer seem accessible to religiously unaffiliated individuals. These desirable aspects of religious affiliation, combined with feelings of loss, may lead to feeling envious of the religiously unaffiliated.

Necessity of Religious Envy Research

Given the worldwide dominance of religion, it makes sense that religious affiliates' experience has been more extensively researched. However, 16% of the world's population identify as religiously unaffiliated, and, in 48% of the world's countries, they are the second-largest "religious" group (Pew Research Center, 2017). However, their presence in psychological research is lacking. In a content analysis of 100 articles on atheism and atheist individuals from the social sciences from 2001 to 2012, Brewster et al. (2014) identified that atheism is understudied in the psychological sciences, which is the nonreligious identity most commonly studied. Furthermore, understanding the experiences of non-religious individuals will be an important way to test the accuracy and implications of various theories of religion. For example, does the nonreligious experience validate the understanding of religion as a system for social unification? Are there benefits exclusive to religious affiliation that are inaccessible to a non-affiliate?

CHAPTER 2: PRESENT STUDY

Purpose

This study aims to explore non-religious people's lived experiences of religious envy. To pursue these aims, the research questions of this study are

1. How do religiously unaffiliated people describe the experience of religious envy?
2. What are common themes in the experiences of religious envy?

Anticipated Themes

Given the benefits of religious affiliation and the consequences of religious non-affiliation evidenced in the literature, I anticipated the emergence of several themes. These themes were social benefits (e.g., feelings of inclusion, a supportive community with similar values, greater social acceptance), existential benefits (e.g., the comfort of having answers to existential questions, belief in an afterlife, faith in the existence of a definite purpose), and benefits relating to the organized structure of religion (e.g., prayer, communal song, structured meetings).

Methodology

Disclosure of Raters' Relevant Identities Two raters (myself and a colleague) worked both independently and collaboratively to develop the coding scheme and code each interview to decrease the likelihood of personal biases influencing the coding of the data. However, it is still relevant to describe relevant aspects of the identities of each rater. Qualitative data analysis (and IPA in particular) requires a degree of subjectivity in judgment, making relevant researcher identities important to disclose (Smith and Osborn, 2008). A more significant amount of attention was given to my background, identities, and assumptions as I performed the post-

coding analysis and interpretations. Therefore, it was more likely that my background and assumptions impacted how the results were interpreted.

I (Rater 1) currently identify as a spiritual but not religious atheist raised by atheist parents. I have never identified with any religion. I identify as someone who has experienced and continues to experience religious envy. These identities have several implications for my interpretation of the data. In order to not infuse my own experiences of religious envy into the analysis, I continuously referred back to the verbatim quotes and interviews, as my own experiences and beliefs could color my memory of what a participant said. Furthermore, my lack of religious experience and knowledge may decrease my understanding of some of the discussed religious topics. For example, Emily described going to a friend's church camp—this is something I have never experienced, so it was difficult for me to understand the kinds of activities or conversations within this kind of environment.

Rater 2 was raised as a Lutheran. She was baptized and confirmed within the Lutheran church. Rater 2 stayed in the Lutheran church until age 16 and has identified as an atheist since that time. At the time of data analysis, Rater 2 did not identify with feelings of religious envy. She noted that the process of leaving the Lutheran church may have contributed to her lack of religious envy. She shared that she experienced disillusionment within her religious identification and noted that she does not miss the church.

Participants

The goal of IPA is to understand how individuals make sense of and understand their lived experiences. These personal, experiential accounts are compiled and interpreted to develop an understanding of the phenomenon (in this case, religious envy; Finlay, 2011). IPA aims to give detail and enhance understanding of a particular group (Smith and Osborn, 2008).

Guidelines on IPA methodology suggest sample sizes of between three to six participants to provide a focused, detailed analysis of each participant's experience without getting overwhelmed by data (Finlay, 2011). For this reason, four participants were recruited for this study. This sample size allowed for a thorough investigation into the detail and depth of the participant's experiences and how they have made sense of these experiences.

IPA methodology is best suited to gathering a large amount of deep, meaningful information on the experiences of a small group of homogeneous participants (Smith et al., 2009). Therefore, this study solely focused on atheists living in the United States between 18 and 30, though religious envy may occur in a diverse range of individuals. According to the Pew Research Center, this age range has the most significant proportion of non-religious adults in the US—just under a third identify as not religiously affiliated (2019b). Furthermore, participants must have been raised without religion (i.e., in a non-religious household). This criterion was included as an attempt to focus on religious envy without other emotional factors, such as grief at the loss of religious identity or new relational difficulties (e.g., Fenelon and Danielsen, 2016; Knight et al., 2019; May, 2017), that may obfuscate feelings of envy. For previously religious individuals or individuals raised in religious households, feelings that arise due to disaffiliation may be inextricably connected to experiences of religious envy. Finally, participants must have experienced religious envy. No definition of religious envy was given to let the participants identify what they felt religious envy entailed. This study aims to understand how individuals describe this experience—trying to describe what this experience may entail would directly contradict this purpose.

Participants were recruited through solicitation emails to various nonreligious organizations (including Pikes Peak Atheists, Secular Directory, Atheist Alliance, Boulder

Atheists, Secular Hub, American Atheists, Western Colorado Atheists, and Freethinkers). Due to the relatively disorganized nature of nonreligious individuals, utilizing these groups was an essential tool in order to find a relatively homogenous sample. Individuals met the criteria if they: a) were between the ages of 18 and 30 years old, b) identified as atheists, c) lived in the United States, and d) was raised in a nonreligious household. Several individuals responded to the recruitment but did not meet the inclusion criteria for participation in the study (e.g., some were outside the age restriction, affiliated with a religious organization, or raised in a very religious household). Four individuals that fully met the criteria contacted the primary investigator. Each of these individuals was interviewed using the same semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix). Pseudonyms will refer to the participants throughout in order to maintain anonymity.

Although each participant felt that they met the requirement of being “raised without religion,” only Emily identified as a lifelong atheist who had no family ties to any religious organization. Stacey and Rose described family members as having a religious affiliation but noted that the claimed religious affiliation was not a part of the way they were raised. Adam described a markedly different religious background than the other participants. Adam reported that, similar to Stacey and Rose, his family members claimed to have a religious affiliation that did not directly influence his upbringing. However, Adam independently decided to become engaged with Catholicism as a teenager before he came to identify as an atheist. While Adam fits the original criteria of being raised without religion, it is necessary to note that he was significantly involved with religion, unlike the other three participants.

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used to collect the data for this study. The semi-structured interview process is highly encouraged in IPA (Smith and Osborn, 2008). It allows for a standardized set of questions and the flexibility for the interviewer to probe for further information. In IPA, it is essential that participants are allowed to share their perspectives on their situation and give detail as to how they understand their experiences (Smith and Osborn, 2008). The semi-structured interview format allows participants the freedom to develop and share their narratives. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews are helpful in IPA in terms of rapport development (Smith and Osborn, 2008). Rapport development is critical to this study, as the nature of the interview could lead to sensitive topics regarding nonreligiousness. All participants gave informed consent to participate in this study.

The semi-structured interview questions were open-ended or led to an open-ended follow-up question (why or why not). Furthermore, the interviewer developed a rapport with the interviewee before engaging in the semi-structured interview through introductions, thanking the participant for their time, and directly indicating a non-judgemental environment. During the semi-structured interviews, the interviewer responded to answers with follow-up questions to gain clarity. Clarifying questions remained as neutral as possible to prevent the participants from interpreting judgment from the interviewer. The semi-structured interview questions and probes are included in the Appendix.

While performing the semi-structured interview, I did not disclose my own nonreligious identity to the participants. Several participants noted that they did not know whether I identified as a religious or nonreligious individual. This lack of personal religious or nonreligious identification may have biased the participants' responses. It is possible that participants may have expressed themselves differently if they knew whether I was or was not religious, as

religion can be an emotionally charged topic. Identifying as religious could have discouraged openness regarding reasons for staying nonreligious and discussion of negative perceptions about religion. Identifying as nonreligious may have biased the participants away from pointing out some of the positive experiences they have had with religion but may have caused participants to express their negative perceptions of religion more strongly.

Data Analysis

The interview content was analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA was selected based on its focus on detailing complex experiences (see Participants section). According to Smith and Osborn (2008), “IPA is a suitable approach when one is trying to find out how individuals are perceiving the particular situations they are facing, how they are making sense of their personal and social world” (p. 55).

My analysis method closely reflected the analysis structure employed by Smith and Osborn (2008). The audio from each interview was recorded, transcribed, and edited by the principal investigator to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. The principal investigator (Rater 1) and another graduate student (Rater 2) versed in IPA independently read the first transcript multiple times and made annotations based on significant domains and themes. Each rater used these annotations to develop emerging themes independently. Then, both raters collaborated on the wording of these themes to ensure that they best captured what the participant was describing. The raters then collaboratively developed domains within which these themes could be appropriately organized. This process was repeated with each interview. When new themes arose, the raters discussed if a new theme should be developed or if the emerging theme seemed to be a part of an existing theme. The raters also discussed the notes

they made while independently coding and how their own identities could impact their perspective of what the participant was saying.

After each interview went through an initial coding round, the transcripts were then independently recoded according to the domains and themes that had been collaboratively developed from all four interviews, to ensure that the coding scheme developed based on the first interview was not biasing the raters' perspectives of each subsequent interview. The two raters then compared their codes to determine the interrater reliability score. The calculated interrater reliability score was 91.7%. From this thematic analysis, I constructed a "final table of superordinate themes" (Smith and Osborn, p. 75, 2008) included in the Appendix.

CHAPTER 3: RESULTS

Several domains arose in each interview relating to the semi-structured interview questions I asked each participant (see Appendix). These domains are perceptions and beliefs about religion or religious individuals, previous experiences with religion, religious envy, and reasons for staying nonreligious. Each domain plays an integral role in capturing the experience of religious envy. While only one domain directly addresses the content and reasons for the participants' religious envy, each domain is relevant to the understanding of religious envy—what events may have led to experiencing religious envy, what perceptions and beliefs the individuals have about religion that might contribute to their experience of religious envy, and the reasoning behind the individual continuing to identify as an atheist despite experiencing religious envy.

Domain 1: Perceptions and Beliefs

This domain addresses the participants' perceptions and beliefs about religion and religious individuals. It is necessary to frame this domain not as truths but as the way the participants *perceive* religion and religious individuals. Participants identified that they perceived religiousness as a dominant identity in the United States (*Theme 1-1*), believed that religious individuals assume that religion is necessary for morality (*Theme 1-2*), perceive hypocrisy of religious teachings, practices, or individuals (*Theme 1-3*), perceive harmful religious teachings or practices (*Theme 1-4*), believe religion to be restrictive in nature (*Theme 1-5*), and recognize the importance/value of religion for others (*Theme 1-6*).

Theme 1-1: Religiousness as a dominant identity in the United States

Three of the four participants identified the belief that being religious is a dominant identity in the United States. These participants noted that U.S. society seems to be primarily

structured around religion (specifically evangelical Christianity). At the end of our interview, Stacey noted the inverse of this theme, i.e., nonreligiousness being a minority identity, and said “I don't think anybody ever talks about [the experience of being nonreligious]. It feels like, you know, I'm just living in the Christian world sometimes.”

Theme 1-2: Religious individuals assume that religion is necessary for morality

Two of the four participants identified a belief about the views of religious individuals—specifically, that religious individuals assume that there must be a religious foundation for morality. Both participants that endorsed this theme explicitly stated that they believe (and have been explicitly told) that religious individuals do not think that nonreligious individuals, and atheists, in particular, can be moral or have a legitimate moral grounding. The participants who endorsed this theme described feeling hurt or distressed by the effects. Emily spoke to this theme, saying that “some people treat [religion] like a moral compass, which I always found a little insulting uh, because, you know, I didn't need that to still be a moral person.”

Theme 1-3: Hypocrisy of religious teachings, practices, or individuals

Three of the four participants cited hypocritical religious teachings, practices, or individuals. This theme encompasses both specific beliefs that the participants held about certain religious practices or religious individuals and general beliefs about large-scale hypocrisy within religious organizations and teachings. On a large scale, participants noted the hypocrisy of widespread intolerance from religious organizations and the capitalization and corporatization of religious organizations. Specific examples that participants gave of hypocritical religious teachings, practices, or individuals included televangelism or the pattern of sexual abuse of children by members of the Catholic Church and the endorsement of slavery in the Christian

Bible. Adam noted the hypocrisy of basing one's morality on the word of God. He utilized a hypothetical situation to point out why he believes this to be hypocritical:

...if God came down and told me that...that murder was good and killing was good and hurting people is good, and you wanted to remain a follower of God, but you would have to, to still be a Christian...you'd be forced to either follow His commands or be doomed.

Furthermore, Adam described an experience in which a religious individual claimed that they would have no reason not to kill, murder, and steal if there was no god. Adam described that conversation as quite disturbing and a cause for him to reflect on religious teachings as a whole.

Theme 1-4: Harmful religious teachings and practices

All participants noted that they believed certain religious teachings or practices are harmful. Similar to *Theme 1-3* (hypocrisy of religious teachings, practices, or individuals), the participants referenced large-scale harm and specific instances of harmful religious teachings or practices. In many instances, participants noted religious teachings or practices that they believed are harmful on a large scale. These included religious perspectives on gender equality and the role of women, religion's historical role in wars, and the growth and impact of religious extremism. Three of the four participants made specific references to misogyny within religious teachings and the harm it causes. Emily identified that, from a young age, she has disagreed with the gender stereotypes that were promoted in a friend's youth group:

I remember a time or two that I went to youth group with friends and I remember seeing the teachings of gender roles and I remember, even at, you know, 14 and 15, I couldn't stomach that idea...that never sat well with me...so you know I've always had an issue with those kinds of gender stereotypes...

Stacey identified similar disagreements with views that she felt were harmful, stating that religion has "too many drawbacks, like backward ideas about gender, for example, or the LGBTQ community...I could just go on and on."

Several participants noted their perception of religious groups engaging in harm towards the LGBTQIA+ community, explicitly referencing the Westboro Baptist Church’s inflammatory “God Hates Fags” refrain. Adam noted an encounter in which a religious individual proclaimed that non-straight people should be “ideally” put in prison—this religiously-motivated claim gave Adam reason to feel religion is harmful to non-straight individuals. Other examples of harmful religious teachings or practices included religious individuals being against the pro-choice movement and teaching Creationism, as opposed to the Theory of Evolution.

Much of the content within this theme overlaps with the content of *Theme 1-3* (hypocrisy of religious teachings, practices, or individuals). Many times, codes for *Theme 1-3* and *Theme 1-4* were given to the same section of an interview, as many participants identified hypocrisy on topics that harmed others.

Theme 1-5: Restrictive nature of religion

All participants noted that they perceived religion to be restrictive in nature. This theme referred to the perception of religion being prescriptive regarding how one should live. This theme closely relates to *Theme 4-2*. When participants pointed out the restrictive nature of religion, they often noted that one of the benefits of being nonreligious is the freedom from these restrictions. When asked what she thought life might be like as a religious person, Stacey stated:

[If I were to become religious], I would feel like opinions and things like that are being pushed onto me... it would feel like there's no diverse opinion and [their opinions] were all being pushed on to me and I don't—that would drive me crazy.

Furthermore, Emily identified that restrictive gender roles for women are particularly important to her, saying that she has “no desire to have children...that's usually a big thing with churches, is they like to see ‘go forth and multiply’— not me...definitely not the homemaker either.”

Theme 1-6: Recognition of the importance/value of religion for others

Three participants made specific reference to their view that religion is important to and holds value for many individuals. Specific content within this theme included the recognition of religion helping people cope with loss and uncertainty, serving as a source of community, motivating people to engage in prosocial behaviors, and providing moral scaffolding. Stacey noted that, while she does not feel religion to be personally significant, “religion is a really important thing to a lot of people, which I respect.” Emily gave specific contexts in which religion may benefit others. She said:

I think [religion] is more of a community setting—like an extension of their family and their community—other people, it can help them cope with, you know, the bigger question of life’s purpose or dealing with loss or tragedy or just general struggles.

Domain 2: Previous Experiences with Religion

This domain addresses the experiences that the participants had relating to religion and their nonreligiousness. Previous experiences that participants described included religious experiences due to external pressure (*Theme 2-1*), the overt vilification of nonreligiousness (*Theme 2-2*), open engagement with religious discourse (*Theme 2-3*), ostracism due to their nonreligiousness (*Theme 2-4*), feelings of isolation due to their nonreligiousness (*Theme 2-5*), and uncomfortable interactions with religious individuals (*Theme 2-6*).

Theme 2-1: Religious experiences due to external pressure

All four participants endorsed having at least one religious experience due to external pressure. These experiences included religious services or events, such as church camps, weekly services, and youth groups. These experiences either happened without the knowledge or consent of the participant or occurred due to social pressure. Participants noted various sources of social pressures, including neighbors, friends, extended family, and a romantic partner. Emily shared her first memory of being at a religious service:

I remember going to church with our elderly neighbor was my first experience [with religion], and right away I didn't feel like I belonged there as a little kid... I really had no idea what was going on or why I was there and it was all new and weird, so I would avoid going with the neighbor whenever she would invite us.

Stacey also described going to a religious event without understanding its meaning beforehand:

[My friend] invited me to a church camp, which I didn't even really understand what that meant...I went to a whole week of church camp, unaware of what was happening, and it was terrible...I went to that church camp and everybody sang songs and that was it.

Theme 2-2: Explicit vilification of nonreligiousness

Three out of four participants referred to experiences in which they were overtly vilified for being nonreligious. These experiences include being told they are going to hell, being told that they are immoral or have no basis for their morality, and having family conflicts directly related to being nonreligious. Emily shared two of these experiences:

...I remember like my friends finding out [about my nonreligiousness] and them all looking at me and being like “well, you're stupid for believing that...or not believing that” I guess that, like “you're going to end up in hell because of that,” or having a really close friend tell me that, like “my church tells me not to be friends with people like you.”

[My religious ex-boyfriend] tried to tell me that the depression I was being treated for was because my soul knew that I wasn't going to heaven...

Adam shared difficulty when dating. He noted that he would not mind dating someone with a religious identity but that:

[Religious individuals] don't like, consider me to be like a [romantic] prospect because I, I'm, you know, I'm a quote, unquote like, “I'm immoral. How could I? I don't have a basis for my beliefs, and I, like where do my morals come from? Yeah, how could I ever, you know?”

In sharing this, Adam appeared to be wrestling with the social consequences of holding an identity that could not have morals according to these religious romantic prospects.

Theme 2-3: Open engagement with religious discourse

All four participants explicitly referenced open engagement with religious discourse. This open engagement encompasses engagement with religious individuals, religious practices, and religious teachings. The participants described discussing religion with religious friends, going to religious services in order to learn more about a particular religion, and having a general interest in religion. These encounters with religion were described as generally positive experiences in which the participants chose to engage with religion instead of more negative experiences and experiences where they did not choose to engage with religion (see *Theme 2-1: religious experiences due to external pressure*). Emily shared that, while she may not be looking for individuals to explain the basis of their faith, she finds enjoyment in conversations about different belief systems:

I always find it kind of interesting and I do enjoy talking about [religion] with people and try to understand...other people's belief systems. I never really get into the nitty-gritty of, you know “why do you believe that?” It's more of you know, uh, you know, “tell me about your religion” and “tell me you know, what you, what you guys do believe?”...I don't claim to really understand [religion] as a whole, especially kind of looking at it from the outside, as somebody that doesn't really understand *why* people believe that, but trying to appreciate it and respect that they do.

Rose shared that she had explored an interest in different religious traditions before. She gave an example:

[My friend and I] were actually taking an Eastern Religions class together... we wanted to take a course together and that one sounded relatively interesting. We took that one and that's how we heard about [the Buddhist meditation center], so we went together, so it was also a way just to do something interesting with friends.

Stacey shared that she talks with a close friend about their differing beliefs, noting that “one of my best friends is really religious, but we talk about it and we respect each other’s preference in belief.”

Theme 2-4: Ostracism due to nonreligiousness

Two of the four participants endorsed experiencing ostracism due to their nonreligious identity. Though related to the theme of overt vilification of nonreligiousness, this theme specifically to experiences in which participants were singled out due to their nonreligiousness, but were not necessarily overtly vilified. Emily shared the responses she received from friends when she “came out” to them as nonreligious:

By high school, I was kind of telling my friends my thoughts and feelings and they were...they were not understanding. They were all kind of confused about it, or they would tell me that I was stupid for having those thoughts.

Rose shared that her extended family had ostracized her and her parents due to their being nonreligious. She shared that they have been “pretty much ostracized for our family, so that would probably be the biggest con [of being nonreligious]” She further described that, though there are occasions that bring the whole family together, discord inevitably develops due to her and her parent’s nonreligiousness:

Then there's been a lot of family conflict because of that, because of my parents being nonreligious and ultimately really raising us without religion....Things change over time like there will be a death in the family and suddenly some people will come together. But then things crop up again and it always seems to come back to just differing beliefs, and they're just unwillingness to respect that essentially.

Theme 2-5: Feelings of isolation due to nonreligiousness

All participants endorsed this theme. This theme refers to the participants’ internal experience, as opposed to a response to something that occurred externally. All of the participants referenced feeling as though they didn’t fit in with their peers or that they were alone in their lack of belief at some point in their lives. For the participants that grew up in a more religious community, the isolation seemed to be less situation-specific. Stacey identified the way her feelings of isolation developed in a very religious community:

I grew up around a lot of people who practiced Christianity, and I felt a little isolated because I didn't know anything about it...I just was totally out of the loop...I didn't know

anything. I just thought that there were just people that were religious and they went to their youth groups and I wasn't invited or I was, but I didn't know what it was all about, so I never went.

Emily shared a similar feeling:

I definitely felt kind of alienated a little bit in it...there was definitely times where, when I was younger I kind of wished that I fit in a little bit better. As far as my friends, 'cause I didn't understand, you know, those same things that they were doing, all my my friends were going to like their seminary school during the middle of the day, or seminary classes, or their confirmation classes. And I had... I didn't have those same shared experiences...

Uniquely, Adam went to a religious retreat entirely of his own volition during the period in which he was involved with the Catholic church. Even though Adam identified as religious at this time in his life, he experienced feelings of isolation within a specific part of the retreat:

I didn't really know anybody in the retreat...I wasn't really engaged with anybody. And so we had to do adoration...everybody in that room, and everybody after adoration as well, was talking about how good they were feeling and how fantastic they felt, they were like "Wow, I'm really connected right now to God"...I remember very explicitly thinking to myself...this is total crap like I feel...I feel terrible like I feel nothing. I feel an absolute void...not only do I feel nothing, but I feel actively bad. I'm just miserable and like nothing is happening, nothing is speaking to me, nothing is working.

Though Adam did not identify as nonreligious at that period, he still expressed feelings of isolation amongst other religious individuals. He described feelings of isolation from these individuals because he did not share this apparently transcendent religious experience.

Theme 2-6: Uncomfortable social interactions with religious individuals

Two participants described uncomfortable interactions with religious individuals. This theme refers to encounters with religious individuals that felt awkward, uncomfortable, or "weird." Though these experiences were described as off-putting, they were not described as actively harmful. Stacey described a religious experience she had due to external pressure (*Theme 2-1*) and shared some of the uncomfortable interactions that the situation created:

...[my friend's church camp] was pretty uncomfortable, I think for me, 'cause I think they tried to like, get me to talk, but I just didn't. I went into it not knowing what I was going into and I felt uncomfortable...I didn't know how to fit into that and didn't feel like people were being genuine.

Emily described an event in which a high school teacher asked her to describe the biblical story behind Leonardo da Vinci's "The Last Supper." She shared the information provided in her textbook but could not share more detail. She recalled:

...in frustration [my teacher] just, he flat out asked me like "Don't you know the story of the Last Supper?" and I had to, in front of my entire class, say "No, actually, I don't know anything about it" and I think the realization kind of came across his face and he was like, "Oh, ok, well sit down and I'll just tell everyone about it." You know, that was probably the most embarrassing incident in my life.

While this teacher did not seem to be purposefully ostracizing Emily, it was a byproduct of this uncomfortable interaction that took place in front of her peers. This piece of Emily's story received the code for ostracism due to nonreligiousness (*Theme 2-4*) and uncomfortable interactions with religious individuals (*Theme 2-6*).

Domain 3: Religious Envy

This domain refers explicitly to the primary purpose of this study: to explore nonreligious peoples' lived experiences of religious envy, with a specific emphasis on the way religious envy is described and the common themes in the experiencing of religious envy. This domain addresses the common themes in the experience of religious envy. Participants identified envying religious individuals' sense of community or belonging (*Theme 3-1*), ability to cope with grief or loss (*Theme 3-2*), existential comfort (*Theme 3-3*), and sense of ethical or moral certainty (*Theme 3-4*).

Theme 3-1: Sense of community or belonging

Each of the four participants explicitly referenced envying the sense of community or belonging that religious people seem to have. This ranged from wanting to be accepted by a

social circle to envying deep connections formed by shared belief to the apparent boost a religious community gives to an individual's overall wellbeing. Adam noted that religion seems like a good way to develop community, which is an essential value for him:

I'm also jealous at the sense of community their religion also so much often inspires because I have a big emphasis on community and a big emphasis on human interpersonal relationships and connection is something very important to me...Religion very often for people, I think, serves as a vessel for that...they are going to the same place every week and engaging with those people...so many people connect on that—the type of activity—on church, and I don't... I don't get that—well, I mean when I say I don't get that, I mean like, I just, not that I don't understand it—I don't...I don't have that. I wish I did.

Several participants also referenced the inverse of this theme, noting that nonreligious individuals do not have access to a community of people with shared beliefs. Emily stated that “the biggest negative [of being nonreligious] would be that alienation, and there's not a sense of community like people within a church do have.”

Theme 3-2: Coping with grief/loss

Two of the four participants noted that religion seems to provide aid when coping with grief or losing a loved one. Both participants noted the comfort that belief in an afterlife would bring someone. Rose noted the sense of peace that she imagines religious people feel regarding the afterlife:

...it would be nice just to believe that the people who pass on are just hanging out in the clouds and you'll get to see them again, and that would be a nice, easy way to explain things and it would give you a sense of peace, but I don't really believe that...knowing, or at least feeling, like “They're at rest now and I will see them again” and just having a sense of assuredness that it's okay, I guess...the idea that they're waiting for you and you'll see them again... It's just a sweet idea.

Emily shared a similar sentiment, identifying the way that her beliefs do not allow for anything beyond the finality of death:

[For nonreligious people,] there's also not the belief of, like, “I lost this person close to me, but I'll get to see them again someday.” That's not a belief that I hold, so it's definitely kind of a colder aspect of leaving people in your life...you don't have that

comfort of getting through that grief or that tragedy with, you know, “Things will be better one day,” “I’ll see these people again...”

Theme 3-3: Existential Comfort

All four participants referenced the existential comfort that religion seems to provide outside of the realm of grief and the afterlife (which fit more appropriately into *Theme 3-2*). Participants referenced existential comfort in several ways. Two participants referenced that religious individuals seem to believe in something eternal, unchanging, and purposeful as opposed to existing in a universe that seems to be “happening randomly” or is “unpredictable.” Several participants noted that it would be a great comfort to believe that there is a god and feel confident that this god has a plan. Adam shared that he has accepted existential dread as a mainstay of his experience as a nonreligious person, saying that “the existential dread will probably never go away.” Stacey acknowledged that she does not have a constant source of existential comfort. She noted the relative comfort that religious individuals find in their faith when life feels uncertain or uncontrollable. She also expressed how nonreligious individuals do not have something unchangeable to turn to for reassurance:

My understanding of God is very like static, like he...He's not going anywhere and [religious individuals] always have Him and you know, to me that's not how life is...It's dynamic and things are always changing...that can feel unpredictable or out of my control sometimes, and when someone that's religious is feeling that way...they get a little lost on the road, they can easily just jump back to God.

Theme 3-4: Sense of ethical and moral certainty

Three participants described feeling envy towards the moral or ethical certainty that many religious individuals seem to have. Like the theme of existential comfort (*Theme 3-3*), participants expressed envy for religious individuals’ perceived existential definitiveness, though this theme focuses on moral and ethical definitiveness. Though all participants expressed that they have moral disagreements with religion in some way (*Themes 1-4 and 4-1*), the participants

that endorsed this theme expressed envy towards the sheer concreteness of religious guidelines on ethics and morality. Adam shared that “sometimes I feel as if I actually have no justification for [my moral beliefs]...so I guess I’m jealous of that certainty that [religious individuals] get to have about those subjects.” These participants seem to envy the reassurance of having an external guideline about how to live. Rose shared a similar sentiment to Adam, noting that “not having any sort of guideline...kind of brings its own questions and stresses.” Like the theme of envying existential comfort (*Theme 3-3*), this theme points to underlying existential discomfort and a constant state of not knowing.

Domain 4: Reasons for Staying Nonreligious

The fourth domain explores the reasons that the four participants choose to remain nonreligious. Participants remained nonreligious due to their moral disagreements with religion (*Theme 4-1*), freedom from religious rules and values (*Theme 4-2*), strength in their nonreligious convictions (*Theme 4-3*), view of religion as unnecessary (*Theme 4-4*), and perceived logical inconsistencies found within religion (*Theme 4-5*).

Theme 4-1: Moral disagreements with religion

Three of the four participants identified that moral disagreements with religion contribute to their reasons for staying nonreligious. These participants noted a variety of moral disagreements with religion, religious individuals, or religious teachings. This theme aligns closely with the perceptions of harmful religious beliefs or practices (*Theme 1-4*). Participants would often cite a perceived harmful religious practice and continue to assert this as part of why they chose not to be religious. For Rose, the issue of abortion access was particularly important. She shared her distaste with religious perspectives on the subject and noted that a close family member further discouraged her association with religion:

My grandpa...is extremely Pro-Life...when he learned that I was volunteering for Planned Parenthood, he shared with me that he goes to Planned Parenthood in his town, and he carries a white cross and holds the rosary, and prays for the women inside...things like that are a total turn off, 'cause I would not want to be associated with anyone like that...just knowing that it's people like that in the church and that they feel like it's for them—it just kind of tells me “Well, must not be for you then.”

Adam shared many moral disagreements with the content of the Holy Bible. His extensive disagreements with the morality of the Bible rendered future participation in the Christian religion untenable:

I mean there's a passage in the Bible that literally states if you buy a...if you buy a man, it's fifty silver coins and if you buy a woman it's thirty-two¹. I don't know how they got that exact figure, but speaking to that point earlier, you know people [say] “ah, it's out of context, blah blah blah,” but they're still carrying around the book with them. They still hold it. They still walk around with it. And that seems to me to be a pretty implicit endorsement. Especially if it's part of quote-unquote the “history.” If it's history, put it in a history book.

These examples illustrate moral disagreement on a religious principle and the extension of that disagreement to the individuals who hold those beliefs. As Adam said, the individuals who utilize the Bible for worship implicitly endorse the problematic morality expressed within its pages.

Theme 4-2: Freedom from religious rules and values

All participants noted that being a nonreligious person frees them from the constraints that adherents of religions appear to experience. Participants expressed enjoying their independence in beliefs and moral values. Furthermore, participants seemed to be turned off by the prescriptive nature of religion on intellectual, spiritual, moral, and social issues. This theme may seem to contradict the envy that some of the participants shared for moral and ethical certainty (*Theme 3-4*). However, the envy of certainty is not an endorsement of wanting to live by the guidelines religion provides but rather the sense of certainty itself. Emily identified the

¹ Referring to Leviticus 27: 3-7

feelings of guilt that religious individuals might experience if they do not adhere to their religion's doctrines. She noted that she does not have to worry about that kind of guilt as a nonreligious person:

I don't feel like there's any guilt in my belief. I do feel like, in a lot of cases, religion can be...can really play the guilt card... You know, I have some friends that their family holds their decisions over their heads based on their religious practice, and they're really good people, they're very kind people, and they constantly live with this guilt...I definitely feel like that's a big plus [of not being religious]. Uhm, you know I feel like that's a very freeing thing to not have to worry about.

Stacey shared that being nonreligious allows her to explore all types of belief systems and spirituality:

It feels like it comes with too many rules and laws, and I don't think that's how you should guide your life. And, I mean, it's your life...I don't want to get involved in any of the institutional things and I don't see myself solely identifying to just one forever...I feel like I have more freedom in that, like while, while I'm not gonna believe in "God," there are so many other things to believe in or feel spiritually, so I feel, almost, uh, more freedom in that.

Theme 4-3: Strength in nonreligious conviction

Two of the four participants cited strength in their nonreligious conviction as part of why they are nonreligious. This reason for staying nonreligious was unique in that it referenced the sheer intensity of nonreligious conviction as a rationale for remaining nonreligious. Adam shared that his strength of nonreligious conviction essentially prevented him from the possibility of becoming religious in the future, even if he wanted to:

There has to be a very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very, very compelling ethical argument and then the problem is, I think, if there really was that very, very, very ethical, compelling argument, I don't think anybody would be an atheist, just in the same way that someone who's a little bit more of like a logical atheist than me would say, "Well, hey, if there was a mathematical proof or if there was a single shred of physical evidence, I wouldn't be an atheist either," and that's the problem...there's not either so...that's the issue.

Emily noted that she has simply never wanted to be religious:

I've never really... I've never felt the need to [join a religious organization]. I've never really... I've been pretty strong in my convictions of, you know, where I stand...I never felt that drive.”

Theme 4-4: Personal non-necessity of religion

All four participants cited a personal non-necessity of religion. Every participant noted in their interview that they did not feel that religion was something that they needed in their life, regardless of their expressed envy of religious individuals. Stacey emphasized this point, saying that “if I want to believe in something, I will just believe in it...I don't need to be a part of the group or put the label on myself to participate in that way.” Rose shared that, while she could be drawn to the community that seems to come with religion, she does not have that strong of a need for it at this point in her life:

I feel like community would be the only thing that would reel me in...I'm just not really needing that at this point in my life. I'm pretty close with my parents, like I said, who are both nonreligious...I just kind of don't have a need for an extra sort of connection or an extra obligation or a thing we go to on Sundays...I'm just not too interested.

Theme 4-5: Logical inconsistencies of religion

Only one participant shared that his main reason for staying nonreligious was due to the logical inconsistencies of religion. Adam gave many examples of contradictions and inconsistencies in religious doctrine, specifically within the Christian Bible, making it difficult for him to consider becoming religious. For example, Adam referenced both the Euthyphro dilemma and the problem of evil, two major philosophical arguments against the existence of god(s) in his explanation of why he stays nonreligious:

If [God] told you that, to kill and, you know, steal and all that sort of stuff...If God is the orchestrator of morality, if it comes from Him, then that means that whatever He says goes right so, so you have to accept the killing and the stealing and the murder thing...If He's not the orchestrator of morality and you want to argue that those things wouldn't change and that God could not, if He did not have the ability to command that,—'cause that's often the response that people will have, they'll say, “Well, he couldn't do that, because that's not actually what's moral”— well, if He doesn't have the power to change

morality—the Morality is outside of Himself—there's something greater than Him, so He's not all-powerful anymore. So why would we not then simply be beholden to what the Morality is instead of Him? And that's kind of that confusion...but there's also like the more classic, there's the problem of evil...Why it wasn't an all-powerful, benevolent God, 'cause suffering and then you know, that kind of thing. And those are...those are all my most important reasons [for remaining nonreligious].

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION

This study aimed to address a gap in the literature regarding the nonreligious experience. Multiple existing theories reference and explain some of the benefits experienced by many religiously affiliated people, including the General Attribution Theory of Religion (Spilka et al., 1985), Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski et al., 2015), the Functionalist Perspective of Religion (Durkheim, 1995), and the Religion as a Social Value hypothesis (Gebauer et al., 2012). Existing literature also indicates many negative consequences of holding a religiously unaffiliated identity. These can include experiencing lower levels of trust and respect than religious individuals (Edgell et al., 2006; Oslon & Li, 2015; Starova et al., 2013), the view that they are less moral and less trustworthy than religious individuals (Starova et al., 2013), and the perception that they are a threat to social values (Cook et al., 2015). While we have good evidence on the benefits of religious affiliation and the negative consequences of being nonreligious, there is very little research on the way nonreligious people experience and understand religion, religious individuals, or religious traditions. It is understandable nonreligious individuals may have feelings of envy towards religious individuals arising from the benefits they perceive religious individuals to enjoy.

This study aimed to explore nonreligious people's experiences of religious envy. To pursue these aims, the two main research questions were: (1) How do religiously unaffiliated people describe the experience of religious envy? and (2) What are the common themes in the experiences of religious envy? Based on the benefits of religious affiliation and the consequences of religious non-affiliation, I anticipated themes of religious envy to include social benefits, existential benefits, and benefits relating to the organized structure of religion.

The nature of IPA necessitated recruiting a small, homogenous sample. Therefore, these main questions were specifically directed toward individuals who identify as atheists, were raised in a nonreligious household, are between the ages of 18 and 30, and were living in the United States at the time of interviewing. Four participants that fit these criteria were interviewed using a semi-structured interview method. Their data were transcribed and coded following the IPA analysis method (Smith and Osborn, 2008) and reported using a table of domains with themes that fit within those domains (see Appendix).

Religious Envy

Domain 3 (Religious Envy) most directly addresses the purpose of this study. Within this domain, four themes arose: social connection and belonging (*Theme 3-1*), coping with grief and loss (*Theme 3-2*), existential comfort (*Theme 3-3*), and moral and ethical certainty (*Theme 3-4*). I anticipated both existential and social themes. Based on these four themes, it appears that religious envy is a phenomenon with social and existential components. The participants did not endorse envy of organizational aspects of religious envy, as I had initially anticipated.

The Social Component of Religious Envy

This theme was pervasive in all of the participants' interviews. Based on the participants' descriptions, there seemed to be two forces acting on the social component of religious envy. One force seems related to the positive social benefits of being religious or envying religious individuals because of their access to a supportive community or social network and the sense of belonging it provides. The second force seems related to the negative social consequences of being nonreligious or envying religious individuals because they do not have to face discriminatory experiences, such as the explicit vilification (*Theme 2-4*) of their religious identity.

The positive aspect of the social component of religious envy closely relates to the Functionalist Perspective of Religion proposed by Durkheim (1995). This perspective notes the centrality of social unification. Furthermore, the Functionalist Perspective identifies that religion provides the social functions of enhancing social belonging, promoting group unity, providing positive social evaluation, serving as a marital and reproductive selection process, and creating punishments for behavior deemed immoral (Hood et al., 2018). Nonreligious individuals, within this perspective, do not have access to the social functions of religion. This would provide good reason to envy religious individuals who have access to these additional social benefits. The Functionalist Perspective of Religion focuses on the benefits to the religious ingroup.

The prevalence of discrimination against nonreligious people (and atheists specifically) speaks to the negative element of this theme. While the social benefits of religion may be enticing, their exemption from discrimination experiences may be even more desirable to nonreligious individuals. Atheists are some of the least liked and least trusted individuals in many parts of the world (Edgell et al., 2006; Gervais et al., 2011), are perceived to pose a threat to U.S. values (Cook et al., 2015), and are treated with less respect than their religious counterparts in societies that value religiosity (Starova et al., 2013). Similarly, the Religion as a Social Value (RASV) hypothesis suggests that, in societies that highly value religion, nonreligious individuals sense that they are less socially valued and thus experience lower levels of self-esteem and wellbeing (Gebauer et al., 2017).

The social aspect of religious envy seems to be especially influenced by the themes in *Domain 2* (Previous Experiences with Religion). Nearly all of the previous experiences that the participants described related to the social aspect of religion: religious experiences due to external pressure (*Theme 2-1*), overt vilification of the nonreligious identity (*Theme 2-2*),

ostracism (*Theme 2-4*), feelings of isolation (*Theme 2-5*), or uncomfortable social interactions with religious individuals (*Theme 2-6*). Additionally, *Theme 1-1* (perceiving religiousness as a dominant identity in the U.S.) lends credence to the RASV hypothesis and the participants' experienced isolation, ostracism, and loneliness.

Due to the limited scope of this study, it is unclear if it would be appropriate to separate the social aspect of religious envy into these two aspects or if they do not seem to be phenomenologically separate. While this research hints at the possibility of this aspect of religious envy being multidimensional, more research is needed.

The Existential Component of Religious Envy

The other three themes within the Religious Envy domain relate to the perceived certainty that religious individuals seem to have towards some aspect of life or existence. For *Theme 3-2*, this perceived certainty included faith in a life after death and in the idea that bad things happen for a reason. The participants who endorsed this theme viewed religious individuals as being better able to cope with the death of a loved one or a tragic event because of these existential certainties. According to these participants, feeling certain there is a life after death would undoubtedly make it easier to cope with death. Similarly, feeling confident that bad things happen for a reason would make it easier to cope with tragedies and loss. This theme has robust theoretical support within the Terror Management Theory literature. Pyszczynski et al. (2015) argue that the development of and reliance on religion comes mainly from the human need to manage our fear of death and the knowledge of our mortality. The empirical support as to whether religion leads to improved mental health outcomes in the face of grief and loss is mixed (Sawyer, 2020; Sherkat and Reed, 1992). However, when discussing religious envy, the actual ability of religious or nonreligious individuals to cope with grief or loss is of little importance.

What matters most is the *perception* that religious individuals may have more, or easier, access to coping methods for grief and loss.

This perception leads to the theme of envying the perceived existential comfort that the participants perceived religious individuals to experience (*Theme 3-3*). This theme may be a broader version of coping with grief and loss (*Theme 3-2*) and could be considered “coping with existential questions.” The theme of existential comfort speaks not only to explaining tragic events or life after death but also to other fundamental questions of existence. The participants who endorsed this theme seemed to view religious individuals as having answers to the fundamental question of existence provided to them through their faith. What is my purpose here? How did we come to be here? What does it all mean? These two themes (*Themes 3-2 and 3-3*) speak to how religion is perhaps uniquely designed to give people answers to such questions.

This unique existential comfort of religion identified by the participants is well supported by both the General Attribution Theory of Religion (Spilka et al., 1985) and Terror Management Theory (Pyszczynski et al., 2015). These two theoretical perspectives identify the need for individuals to make sense of the unexplainable, the unknowable, and the unthinkable. Spilka et al. points out that “attributional activity consists in part of an individual’s attempt to understand events and interpret them in terms of some broad meaning-belief system” (1985, p. 4). This attempt to understand and interpret events may be much more difficult for nonreligious individuals, as they must establish their own meaning-belief system. Again, what matters most is not the actual existential comfort of religious individuals but rather the perception of existential comfort in religious individuals.

Theme 3-4 relates to perceived existential certainty as well. This was the only theme in the Religious Envy domain that was not anticipated. Like the theme of coping with grief and loss (*Theme 3-2*), this theme may fit within the theme of existential comfort instead of being distinct in and of itself. The participants who referenced this theme seemed to perceive religious individuals to possess more straightforward answers to the existential question of “How should I live?”

Relationship with Other Domains

Though the domains of Perceptions and Beliefs (*Domain 1*), Previous Experiences with Religion (*Domain 2*), and Reasons for Staying Nonreligious (*Domain 4*) do not speak directly to the content of religious envy, they are relevant to the context in which that envy exists. The participants’ perceptions and beliefs about religion and religious individuals seem primarily influenced by their previous experiences with religion. The described experiences with religion were formative in developing the participants’ understanding of and perceptions and beliefs about religion or the religious experience.

Perceptions and Beliefs and Previous Experiences with Religion

Domain 1 and *Domain 2* are largely negative regarding religion, with both domains having one theme relating to the possible benefits or positive aspects of religion. Both domains seem to contribute to the participants’ reasons for staying nonreligious (*Domain 4*). However, the name of *Domain 1*, “Perceptions and Beliefs” may be deceiving. Within the Religious Envy domain (*Domain 3*), perceptions and beliefs about religion’s benefits/positive aspects are built into the themes. For example, the theme of “coping with grief and loss” (*Theme 3-2*) has a perception of religion built into it. By endorsing this aspect of being a religious individual, the participants implied a perception or belief about religious individuals—namely, that religious

affiliates have an easier time coping with grief and loss than a nonreligious person might. As stated earlier, envying the social aspect of religion speaks to previous experiences with and perceptions of religion that the participants described.

Uniquely, the experiences coded within *Theme 2-3* (open engagement with religious discourse) were overwhelmingly described as positive. The difference between the experiences detailed in *Theme 2-3* and the rest of the themes in this domain is that these experiences were all sought out by the participants. For example, Adam noted that the topic of religion “starts interesting conversation” and described conversations about religion with religious affiliates as “constant positive experiences.” Autonomous and independent engagement seemed to be a key factor in the positive nature of these experiences.

The participants’ largely negative perceptions and beliefs about religion and largely negative previous experiences with religion help explain their reasons for staying nonreligious (Domain 4).

Reasons for Staying Nonreligious

If religious envy causes individuals to be drawn to religion, the themes in this Domain 4 are what (at least in part) appear to push them away from religion. These reasons for staying nonreligious are either stronger than the feelings of religious envy, thus preventing individuals from becoming religious, or they are nonstarters—i.e., no matter how much religious envy the individual experiences, they would not consider joining a religion because of these reasons.

Themes 4-1, 4-2, and 4-5 point to perceived aspects of religion (see *Domain 1*) that the participants opposed. For each of these three themes, the participants’ made the case that these problems, such as the problem of restrictive religious rules and values (*Theme 4-2*), were fundamental and insurmountable. These seemed to be *reasons not to be* religious.

On the other hand, *Themes 4-3* and *4-4* better describe *reasons to be* nonreligious. Neither personal non-necessity of religion (*Theme 4-4*) nor strength in nonreligious conviction (*Theme 4-3*) is actively in opposition to religion; they are not describing aspects of religion that the participants dislike. These two themes challenge the view that nonreligious individuals must be searching for a religion or have a religion-shaped hole in their life. These participants did not describe nonreligion as a state of deficiency, despite having feelings of religious envy.

The combination of *Domain 3* and *Domain 4* leads to an interesting and important distinction in understanding the experience of religious envy: A nonreligious person may envy certain aspects of the religious identity without desiring to hold that identity. This is similar to an individual who chooses not to have children; they may envy certain aspects of being a parent, but that does not mean that they feel as though there is some deficiency in their lives. People without children can feel fulfilled in their lives without ever being a parent, and perhaps nonreligious people can feel fulfilled without ever being religious. Participants' feelings of envy towards certain aspects of religion did not imply that they wanted religion in their lives. All participants endorsed feeling as though religion was not necessary for them, yet all still experienced feelings of religious envy.

Limitations

According to Smith and Osborn (2008), the IPA methodology is best suited to analyzing detailed accounts from a very small group of relatively homogeneous individuals. This necessarily creates some extreme limitations. Saturation is often considered “the gold standard” of qualitative research (Guest et al., p. 60, 2006). Guest et al.'s operationalization of saturation states that “all of the main variations of the phenomenon have been identified and incorporated into the emerging theory” (Guest et al., p. 65, 2006). Guest et al. (2006) also proposed an

approximate number of interviews required for saturation (around twelve). Thereby, it is doubtful that saturation was reached with just four interviews (Guest et al., 2006).

Furthermore, the goal of this study was to investigate this phenomenon that, theoretically, could apply to all types of nonreligious individuals. The homogenous nature of this small group could have prevented me from getting a complete picture of the religious envy spectrum. Non-atheist individuals may be even more inclined towards religious envy—identifying as an atheist gives one a clear group of individuals with a shared nonreligious identity. In contrast, religiously unaffiliated people who don't have a specific nonreligious identity may not have that same access.

Another limitation of this study is the fact that I chose not to disclose my own nonreligious identity during the interviews. It is not clear the extent to which self-disclosure may have impacted the participants' responses. There are several possible impacts that this could have on the participants. By not sharing my own nonreligious identity, the participants may have believed me to be a religious individual and thereby may have been more cautious in their descriptions of their experiences with religion and religious people. Furthermore, because nonreligious individuals experience marginalization and discrimination in the United States, the participants may have been engaging in protective behaviors that could have impacted their willingness to share their experiences openly, especially with someone who has not shared whether they hold the same marginalized identity. However, sharing my nonreligious identity could have led the participants to be less favorable toward religious individuals. They also may have become more biased towards expressing the more negative aspects of their experiences without giving voice to some of their positive perspectives on or previous experiences with

religion. The choice to not disclose was made in an attempt to limit biases and may have created some in the process.

Finally, it is essential to note that almost all of the religious experiences and backgrounds described by participants were with Christianity and different denominations within Christianity.

Future Research Directions

This was exploratory research on a relatively unexplored phenomenon, so this study may be considered an invitation for further investigation. All pieces of this phenomenon need further investigation.

As stated in the limitations section, it is improbable that I was able to reach saturation for even the relatively narrow, homogeneous group from which I sampled. Furthermore, researchers should interview individuals representing the full spectrum of nonreligious people. This study identified possible components of religious envy, but the development of a complete nomological network of religious envy would benefit from a greater breadth of qualitative data. That breadth should include nonreligious individuals of all ages, ethnic backgrounds, religious backgrounds, cultural contexts, and chosen nonreligious identification (e.g. atheist, agnostic, humanist, religious none, spiritual but not religious, nothing in particular).

Next, it is necessary to develop a solidified conceptualization and operationalization. Religious envy is not an established term. Based on the available literature and my own conceptualization, I developed a working definition of religious envy in order to discuss the topic with relative ease. The definition of religious envy given in this study is by no means solidified. As the nomological network of religious envy becomes more defined, a more appropriate and empirically supported definition should be articulated. This is an essential step in developing solid religious envy research.

Once a solid definition of religious envy is established, the next step is to develop a strategy for measuring the construct. After developing a statistically and conceptually robust measure of religious envy, extensive validation of the measure will be needed. This measure can then be used to investigate relationships between other possible predictors, moderators, mediators, and outcomes related to religious envy. Finally, research should be done on the utilization of the religious envy nomological net in clinical contexts.

Implications for Clinicians

Multicultural competency in the counseling profession has long been stressed not only as a critical skill set for promoting client welfare but also as a necessary tool for addressing issues of prejudice, oppression, and racism (Arredondo et al., 1996; Arredondo, 1999; Ponterotto et al., 1995; Ponterotto et al., 2000; Sadowsky et al., 1994; Sue et al., 1992; Sue and Sue, 2008). There has been much progress in multicultural counseling research for many different marginalized identities. However, little attention has been given to the effects of discrimination experiences on non-religious peoples, even though there is good reason to believe that non-religious people experience the negative psychological consequences of discrimination (Abbott and Mollen, 2018; Brewster et al., 2016; Cragun et al., 2012; Goodman and Mueller, 2009). Clinicians working with non-religious individuals need to be competent, recognize the impact of religious background differences, appropriately assess spiritual well-being, and be specifically trained on the struggles and challenges that non-religious individuals face, such as discrimination and spiritual struggles (Sahker, 2016).

Based on the results of this study, clinicians working with nonreligious people should evaluate whether their clients are actively experiencing or have previously experienced religious envy. Nonreligious individuals have thoughts, opinions, and experiences with religion that they

might like to share. Furthermore, understanding the context and content of an individual's religious envy may give clinicians deeper insight into how their nonreligiousness impacts their lives. Religious envy seems to have existential and social components, which are fundamental aspects of the human experience that clinicians should address with all clients. With further research on this topic, clinicians will be able to improve the quality of mental health care for their nonreligious clients.

Summary and Conclusions

This exploratory study found support for the existence of religious envy and several thematic components of religious envy by utilizing Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis to analyze the experiences detailed by each of the participants. Participants described feeling envy towards religious individuals' perceived social connectedness and belonging, ability to cope with grief and loss, existential comfort, and moral and ethical certainty. Information relating to the participants' perceptions and beliefs about religion, previous experiences with religion, and reasons for staying nonreligious were deemed essential to understanding the context within which these participants' feelings of religious envy exist. Further research is required to reach saturation, develop an empirically supported definition of religious envy, and find religious envy measures.

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APPENDIX

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Please state your pronouns, age, and religious background.
2. What previous experiences/encounters have you had with religion, religious practices, or religious individuals?
 - a. Probe: (Clarify) Some examples would be dating someone religious, doing volunteer work within a religious organization, singing in a church choir, or being in a very religious friend group.
3. How would you describe your understanding of religion?
 - a. Probe: (Explore) What role do you think religion plays in society?
 - b. Probe: (Explore) What role do you think religion plays for individuals?
4. One of the requirements for participating in this study is having felt envious of religious individuals. Could you share your experience of feeling envious of religious individuals?
 - a. Probe: (Explore) What about them/their experiences made/makes you envious?
 - b. Probe: (Explore) Are there times when you feel or have felt especially envious of religious people? What do you think causes/caused you to feel more envious at this time or less envious at other times?
 - c. Probe: (Explore) Are there life events that you anticipate will make you feel especially envious of religious individuals?
5. Have you ever tried to become religious or join a religious organization? Why/why not?
 - a. Probe: (Clarify) Some examples include trying prayer, attending religious services, or reading religious texts.
6. Why do you think you remain a non-religious person?

7. How do you think your life would be different if you were to become religious or join a religious organization?
 - a. Probe: (Explore) Please share with me some of the reasons why you feel that way.
 - b. Probe: (Explore) What aspects of your life would change the most if you were to become religiously affiliated?
 - c. Probe: (Explore) Which of these changes would you see as positive versus negative?
8. What are the biggest pros and cons of being an atheist, or being nonreligious in general?
9. What other question or questions do you wish I had asked you about your experiences feeling envious towards religious individuals?

Table 1: Participant Characteristics and Religious Backgrounds

Name	Age	Pronouns	Gender Identity	Childhood Community Type	Current Occupation	Religious Background
Emily	30	she/her			Teacher	No engagement with any type of religion. Has been a “lifelong atheist.”
Stacey	23	she/her	Cisgender Woman	Suburban	English Language Teacher	Parents described as “Catholic and Orthodox,” but noted that religion was never introduced to her and was never a part of her life. Now identifies as an atheist.
Adam	22	he/him			University Student	Family was vaguely Catholic-identifying. P3 decided to become more involved with Catholicism of their own volition in their youth. Now identifies as an atheist.
Rose	28	she/her	Cisgender Woman	Suburban	Paralegal	Was baptized in the Catholic church. Family described as “jumping around various Christian churches” but not being involved in any of them. Now identifies as an atheist.

Table 2: Domains and Themes

Domain	#	Theme
Perceptions and beliefs	1-1	Religion as being a dominant identity in the US
	1-2	Religious individuals assume that religion is necessary for morality
	1-3	Hypocrisy of religious teachings, practices, or individuals
	1-4	Harmful religious teachings and practices
	1-5	Restrictive nature of religion
	1-6	Recognition of importance/ value of religion for others
Previous experiences with religion	2-1	Religious experiences due to external pressure
	2-2	Explicit vilification of nonreligiousness
	2-3	Open engagement in religious discourse
	2-4	Ostracism due to nonreligiousness
	2-5	Feelings of isolation due to nonreligiousness
	2-6	Uncomfortable social interactions with religious individuals
Religious envy	3-1	Sense of community or belonging
	3-2	Method of coping with grief
	3-3	Existential comfort
	3-4	Sense of ethical and moral certainty
Reasons for staying nonreligious	4-1	Moral disagreements with religion
	4-2	Freedom from religious rules and values
	4-3	Strength in nonreligious conviction
	4-4	Nonnecessity of religion
	4-5	Logical inconsistencies of religion