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A Typology of Organized Atheists and Secularists in Germany and the United States

1 Introduction

The typology proposed in this chapter is the result of a transnational study that was carried out in the years from 2006 to 2013. It had been motivated by media reports on atheist activism in Germany, in particular the staging of so-called "religion-free zones" during the *Catholic World Youth Day* festival in Cologne in 2005. It was reported that this activism was carried out by secularist organizations, some of which had been in existence for many years. Initial research made it clear that little was known about these organizations, their networks, activities, and supporters, despite the fact that they might qualify as a social movement. Furthermore, the early stages of the conception of this project coincided with the popularization of the term "new atheism" by Gary Wolf (2006) and the ensuing reports and debate on the authors and books labeled as such. This, too, pointed to the existence of a secularist movement, an international one at that, which seemed to be experiencing a wave of mobilization at the time.

The aim of this research project, as it was conceptualized back then, was twofold. On the one hand, it was conceived to map and delineate the field of secularist, humanist, atheist, and freethought (what the previous chapter called SHAF) organizations in parts of the Western world, and to argue for its classification as a social movement. Germany and the United States, with their marked differences regarding private religiosity and church-state separation, were chosen as representative cases from both sides of the secular/religious divide within the West. On the other hand, the aim was to investigate the motives and biographies of the members of a certain type of those organizations in both countries. Who are those people who, despite having grown up and living under very different socio-religious conditions, feature the commonality of not only being nonreligious, but of being a member of organized atheism?

Over the years during which this particular study was carried out, the research landscape on nonreligion, secularity, and organized atheism has changed dramatically. While at the study's inception such an academic field was almost nonexistent, the phenomenon of "new atheism" prompted an explosion of research activity in this area within a number of different scientific disciplines

(for an early report on this development see Bullivant and Lee 2012). Besides studies on the "new atheist" writings and campaigns themselves (e. g. Amarasingham 2010; Zenk 2010; Taira and Illman 2012), research so far has dealt with the terminology for nonreligion and secularity (e. g. Cragun and Hammer 2011, Lee 2012), the nonreligious' biographies, demographics, and opinions on social issues (e. g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006), their deconversion stories (e. g. Zuckerman 2012), their identity construction as atheists (e. g. Foust 2009; Smith 2011; Beaman and Tomlins 2015), as well as their participation in various forms of organized secularity (e. g. Pasquale 2010; Cimino and Smith 2011). Meanwhile, the field of atheist, secularist, freethought, and humanist organizations and its adherents is more routinely conceived of as a social movement (see e. g. Cimino and Smith 2007, 2014; LeDrew 2016), as evidenced also by this volume. At least, it has been treated as such within the fields of religious studies and the sociology of religion, while curiously the sociology of social movements is only beginning to take note (see e. g. Guenther, Radojcic and Mulligan 2015). Also, the movement's ideological roots as well as conflicting ideological currents that run within it have been detailed (see e. g. LeDrew 2012, 2016). Accordingly, these aspects of the study at hand will not be focused on in this chapter.

While several of these and other studies have begun to explore who organized atheists are, the research presented here has followed some new paths and is able to offer additional insight in this respect. *One* important contribution of this study is that it extends its perspective to continental Europe. The study of nonreligion and secularity has, up to this point, largely concentrated on the English speaking world. This is also true of the existent member studies of atheist organizations, most of which were conducted in the United States of America and Canada – a few in Great Britain and Australia (e. g. Black 1983; Mumford 2015). The secularist movement(s) in continental Europe has (have) hardly been explored so far. For the case of Germany, the study at hand is a first foray to remedy this situation.

Yet, as mentioned before, the typology aims to be inclusive and is based on organized atheists from Germany *as well as* the United States. In addition to a first insight into the German secularist movement, the transnational comparison this approach allows for is the *second* innovation of this research.

Thirdly, much of the prior research on the motives of nonbelievers to join atheistic or freethought-secularist organizations has concentrated on informal meet-up groups or freethought organizations which, through socializing and lectures, mainly serve the identity construction and the treatment of a "nonnormative identity" (Fitzgerald 2003) of atheists who are viewed as "other" in a highly religious society (e. g. McTaggart 1997; Heiner 2008; Foust 2009; LeDrew 2013). Even though there are studies on the political activism of the secularist move-

ment (see e. g. Cimino and Smith 2007, 2014; Kettell 2013), the protagonists of this kind of activism, their biographies and motives, have been explored much less. The research presented here is based on the exploration of organizations which offer their members both community and education *as well as* political activism and protest.

Finally, the material from which the typology was constructed represents a new approach in the exploration of organized atheism and allows for a novel or additional way to perceive and structure the movement's membership. The typology is based on the identification of narrative patterns (Kruse 2011, 2014), meaning the leading motives or topics that emerged in the open-style interviews that were conducted with members. These, in combination with the reported styles of participation, served to identify eight ideal types of members, which have been named: the "political fighter", the "indignant", the "collectivist", the "alienated", the "intellectual enlightener", the "silent intellectual", the "dissociate", and the "euphoric". These types of members are going to be portrayed in some detail further down in this chapter. Before that, the following section will introduce the sampling and methodology of the study.

2 Sample and Methodology

As at the time of the study's initiation the field of nonreligion and secularity had hardly been explored, a qualitative approach was chosen. Also, semi-structured in-depth interviews were considered the optimal method for the exploration of organized atheists' personal views on their activism, their ways into the organizations, as well as their worldviews and religious / nonreligious biographies – questions which stood at the heart of the study.

Sampling

A first step toward that goal consisted in the sampling of potentially relevant cases on two levels: the level of organizations, and the level of members. In order to capture the variety of cases "out there", regarding members, the aspiration was to find maximally different cases. Yet, in order to allow for comparability, on the level of organizations it was necessary to limit variation to a certain type of groups. Accordingly, organizations that would qualify for the sample had to meet the following criteria:

With respect to the intended variety of members' socio-religious backgrounds, they had to be located in substantially different regions, particularly

as relates to the role of religion – though my interest was exclusively on Western countries. Besides practical reasons of accessibility, this was the major reason for choosing Germany and the United States as countries for consideration. Both offer considerable internal plurality regarding socio-religious landscapes, with the predominantly Catholic Bavaria, the Lutheran North, and the largely secular East in Germany, as well as the religiously mixed and relatively liberal West Coast, the mainline Protestant Midwest, and the evangelical Baptist South or "Bible Belt" in the United States. In addition to this intended variation in location, on the other criteria the chosen organizations were supposed to be similar to one another.

One important demand was that the targeted organizations shared similar goals. As outlined above, one aim of the study was to find organizations which offered their adherents not only a place for socializing and identity formation via community and education, but also the chance for political activism, e. g. via participation in protest, work on press releases, or in other public relations or outreach projects.

Another demand was for the organizations to take a medium or center position regarding their topical scope and targeted population. Some groups follow only a defined narrow goal within the realm of atheism and secularism or are open only to a subset of nonbelievers, such as *Camp Quest* (that organizes secular summer retreats), or the *Secular Student Alliance*. Organizations at the other end of the spectrum, while being critical of religion and church at times, address much wider issues and, accordingly, attract a more general audience. Examples for this include civil rights organizations like the *American Civil Liberties Union* (*ACLU*) and the *Humanistische Union* (*HU*), or rationalist and skeptics groups. In contrast to both of these "extremes", the organizations that were to be sampled needed to be open to all the nonreligious and to be concerned with issues relating to atheism and secularism exclusively.

In the United States these criteria were easily met by a large number of locally active atheist groups that were either affiliated with or chapters of the *Atheist Alliance International* (today: *Atheist Alliance of America*) or *American Atheists* (compare Fazzino & Cragun in this volume). These groups typically hold a monthly meeting, where they will often have a guest speaker – such as a scientist, political activist, or author – as well as other regular meetings, for example book clubs, discussion groups, or charitable activities. But they also act out, either in the form of protests against (usually locally relevant) infringements on the separation of church and state, in the form of writing letters to the editor, or in the form of regular radio or TV programs that they produce for free access cable channels. U.S. organizations which found their way into the sample were *San Francisco Atheists* and *Atheists and Other Freethinkers* of Sacramento from

California, *Minnesota Atheists* from Minneapolis / Saint Paul, and the *Atlanta Freethought Society* from Georgia.

In Germany, it turned out to be a bit more difficult to find matching organizations. My criteria were met best by the Munich chapter of the *Bund für Geistesfreiheit Bayern* (*BfG*, *Freethought Association of Bavaria*). Even though the *BfG* is officially recognized by the Bavarian state as a "worldview congregation" with roots in the 19th century free-religious movement, the Munich based group in particular had become known for its political activism in opposition to the pronounced influence of religion – particularly Catholicism – on the operations of the state at the time of my research. The other group from Germany that was included has a decidedly political orientation. As its name suggests, *IBKA* (*Internationaler Bund der Konfessionslosen und Atheisten*, *International League of the Non-Affiliated and Atheists*) commits itself to fighting for the political rights of citizens without religious affiliation or religious belief – contrary to its name, though, its activism is not international, but focused mainly in Germany. As for socializing, some of its regional chapters, at the time of this study, offered meet-ups, movie nights, or sporadic guest lectures as well. Therefore, *IBKA* members from different parts of Germany were selected for the sample, too.

Individual members of these organizations were sampled with the idea of maximum variation in mind. While the short research time of only two months in the United States did not allow for the interplay between sampling, interviewing, analyzing, and only then further sampling and interviewing that is characteristic of the strategy of "theoretical sampling" (see e. g. Ritchie and Lewis 2003, 80 – 81), the large number of interviews conducted with very diverse members nonetheless afforded the opportunity to contrast very different cases *ex post facto*, which is in line with this research strategy as well. Members were contacted via various paths. In the case of most of the American organizations, my visit to the area and my call for interviewees was announced well in advance in the organizations' newsletters. Also, this research journey involved a visit to the respective organizations' monthly meetings, which allowed for the introduction of the research project as well as on-the-spot recruitment of interviewing subjects.

In the case of the German organizations, the Munich based *BfG* group and nationally active *IBKA*, their annual main assemblies served the same purpose. Another occasion for recruiting interviewees was a monthly meet-up of the Cologne-based *IBKA* group. In order to find members more spread out over the country, who did not regularly participate in group activities, a call for interviewees was placed in *IBKA*'s online forum. This as well as the announcements in the U.S. organizations' newsletters ensured the participation not only of highly active, but also of more or less passive members. In order to counter a potential bias due to self-recruitment or recruitment only via "gatekeepers" (such as the

organizations' presidents), who sometimes helped to find interviewees, several members were approached by myself and asked for participation in interviews. This also helped to increase the socio-demographic variety of participants.

All in all, 63 interviews were conducted, 58 of which were used for the analysis. Of these 58 interviews, 36 were with members of American organizations, and 22 with members of German organizations. The ratio of men to women was 39 to 19. Regarding age, seven interviewees fell into the range of 21–30 years, 11 each into those of 31–40 and 41–50 years, nine members were between 51 and 60 years old, 16 between 61 and 70, and finally four were 71 years old or older. Even though the sample was not drawn for statistical, but rather theoretical representativeness, the gender and age ratios are somewhat typical of secularist organizations, which are known for a predominantly male and older membership (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 106; Pasquale 2007, 47). Also, the educational level in these groups is usually above average, and Pasquale reports a predominance of educational occupations for the members of a secular-humanist group in the American Pacific Northwest (Pasquale 2010, 50). Both of these patterns were observed in this study's sample as well. Aside from teachers and university educators, there was some diversity regarding the interviewees' (former) occupations: they ranged from scientists, lawyers, and physicians, to architects and IT specialists, to paramedics, secretaries, and booksellers. While some of the younger participants were still attending college, most of the older respondents had already retired from their jobs. A few of the interviewees were unemployed, with one living in an alternative commune. A peculiarity of the American sample was that two of the members used to be priests in their earlier careers. Ethnically, most participants were Northern European or of Northern European descent, with the exceptions of an Italian, a Greek, a Brazilian, and one Iranian. Only one interviewee was African-American and another one of Asian descent.

Data collection and analysis

The interviewing technique used was semi-structured interviews in the tradition of the "problem-centered interview" (Witzel 2000). In contrast to totally open, narrative interviews, the purpose of this interviewing tradition is the exploration and collaborative reconstruction of a fixed "social problem" or "issue" that the researcher has already acquired some familiarity or "theoretical sensitivity" with. This familiarity paired with the desire to learn about different dimensions of the problem at hand structures the interviewing guideline by providing a number of topical fields that are to be addressed. The interviews for this study

started out with a warming-up phase, in which respondents were asked to intro-
duce themselves and to talk about their general biographies. After this, the main
topical fields that were explored were (1) the interviewees' ways into their organ-
izations, (2) their worldview or religious / nonreligious biographies, and (3) their
experiences, activities, and opinions as members of their organizations.

These three fields of interest also structured the first step of the analysis: the
use of the "qualitative case contrasting method", as detailed by Kelle and Kluge
(2010). Building upon the practice of open coding in grounded theory (e. g.
Strauss and Corbin 1998), in this approach categories and subcategories are de-
vised deductively from the pre-structure of the interviews as well as inductively
from the text and contrasted, refined, and restructured systematically by com-
parison of a range of cases, until the variation within the field is sufficiently de-
lineated.

The aim of the second step of the analysis was to reduce the overwhelming
variety found – regarding organized atheists' ways into the movement, their
worldview formation, as well as their views on and experiences of activism –
with the construction of a typology of very basic, exemplary, or ideal types of
members. This typology was constructed using an analytical method delineated
by Jan Kruse (2011, 2014). It builds on the identification of certain "narrative pat-
terns" that are deemed to be characteristic of the individual respondents, which
are made up of central motives and discursive habits that occur consistently
throughout the interview – especially in so-called "rich" or "dense" passages
as well as in the opening monologues (Kruse 2011, 176). The identification of
four such narrative patterns in combination with the reported activism, behavior,
and ambitions of the interviewees led to the construction of eight ideal types of
organized atheists.

3 The Diversity of Organized Atheists

Investigating the members of atheist organizations, the study presented here has
focused on the fact of their membership. It has studied organized atheists *as
members*. What do they do as members of their organizations? What do they
think about the activities of their groups and about other members? How did
they get to be a member in the first place? And what has been the history of
their worldview formation leading up to becoming a member? As it turns out,
the diversity of answers to these questions is overwhelming. This section will ex-
plore some of this diversity and will put into focus those results which either
contradict or amplify our knowledge of organized atheists from prior studies.

Worldview and Worldview Formation

There is some debate, both among scholars and within organized atheism, over whether agnostics should count as part of the atheist movement (see Cimino and Smith 2007, 416; McGrath 2004, 174; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006, 25). But considering that agnosticism, rather than an independent worldview position which is softer or less radical than atheism, actually constitutes a method of reasoning by which one may arrive at either an atheist or theist position (Eller 2010, 8 – 9), it is not surprising that agnostics have always been involved in atheist organizations – and several members identify that way primarily. In general, many – even though by no means all – of the members of atheist or secularist organizations give a lot of thought to how to position themselves regarding their worldview and what to call themselves. This was evidenced by the inscription on Paul G.'s (Atheists and Other Freethinkers, AOF, 76) – the creator of the "Brights" – business card. It read:

> I am a bright (my naturalistic worldview is free of supernatural / mystical elements). I am agnostic in regards to unverifiable claims (including gods), humanistic in morals, pragmatic in actions, freethinking in regards to authority, existentialistic in philosophy, sartrienne in regards to purpose, scientific in regards to what constitutes knowledge, contrarian in demeanor, and skeptical with respect to all the aforementioned.

Whether they call themselves "atheist", "agnostic", "secular humanist", "naturalist", "bright", "Jewish atheist", "mystic", or some other term I found in my sample, such as "liberal" or "realist", organized atheists presumably share at least the commonality of being nonreligious in some form and also critical of (at least certain aspects and variants of) religion.

Yet they have arrived at this common place via very different routes of worldview formation. Some of these routes have been outlined by Stephen LeDrew (2013), who, in his research on atheist activists in Canada and the U.S., has differentiated five "different trajectories to atheist identity and activism". Of the five paths he describes, two have secular socialization as their starting point, while three start out from religious socialization. All five eventually lead to atheism and only from there to atheist activism. While this typology of different routes of worldview formation matches the experiences described by most of the interviewees from my study, there are at least a few cases in which this model is not sufficient. In several cases there was ambiguity regarding the classification of a participant's socialization as having been either "religious" or "secular". Some of the respondents grew up in a home that was only nominally religious. Others experienced cognitive dissonance early on, either because their parents were not both equally religious, belonged to different churches, or changed religious affili-

ation continuously over a short period of time. Others grew up in a strongly religious household within a secular environment or in a secular household within a religious environment.

Additionally, a few cases had not even acquired an atheist identity or a position critical of religious belief at the point at which they entered their atheist organization. Dietmar H. (BfG, 50), for example, was recruited as a member for *BfG Munich* only after being interviewed on the group's radio program. The group had invited him to their show as a victim of purported church-state entanglements. At the time, Dietmar had made local headlines after a gay pride float mocking Pope Benedict for his anti-gay rights policies, which he and his colleagues had created, had been confiscated by the Bavarian police under dubious charges of "insulting a foreign head of state". Up until meeting the *BfG* group and learning more about their positions, Dietmar had never considered himself an atheist, but was only critical of different religious traditions for their views on gay rights. He had even studied theology in college and had been employed as a public school teacher for Protestant religious education for many years, a job he only quit for a more promising career option, not for a lack of religiosity. Even though he said that he did not believe in a personal god, he still regarded Jesus as an ethical role model and expressed spiritual ideas.

A similar case was that of Brigitte S. (BfG, 42). Even though she had disaffiliated from the Catholic Church long ago, as she was at odds with its conservative positions on many social issues, she had never thought about cultivating a more pronounced secular identity. This only changed when she made friends with two active members of the *BfG* group and decided to join in order to do "something meaningful". One explanation for these cases may be the widespread perception of a strong privilege and influence of the Catholic Church in Bavaria. As *BfG Munich* does not only act as a secular "worldview congregation" ("Weltanschauungsgemeinschaft"), but as an activist group fighting for the separation of church and state, it is conceivable that the group and its goals are deemed attractive also for citizens who do not identify as atheists primarily.

Ways into Organized Atheism

While Dietmar and Brigitte found their way into *BfG* through personal contacts, atheist organizations also employ more conscious and systematic attempts at "frame bridging": making people who share similar views aware of the organizations' existence (Snow et al. 1986, 467–469). They may advertise in progressive media, practice outreach via their own media channels, or employ the strategy of "bloc recruitment" (Oberschall 1973) by cooperating with other movements or, at

least in the case of the American organizations, Unitarian Universalist churches, which provide some membership flow. Even though the literature on social movements stresses such active efforts at mobilization by movement actors, in the case of atheist organizations "self-recruitment" – i.e. the active search for a group one can join – seems to be even more important. Goodwin and Jasper (2009) describe self-recruitment as a common reaction to so-called moral shock. This kind of shock may set in when "events or information raise such a sense of outrage in people that they become inclined toward political action, with or without a network of contacts" (Goodwin und Jasper 2009, 57–58). Outrage may be generated by so-called "suddenly imposed grievances" (Walsh 1981, 2), which can be events or new developments, perceived as scandalous, that are reported on in the media. To Steven F. (Atlanta Freethought Society, AFS, 50), for example, the publically staged prayer for rain after a drought period by the governor of Georgia on the steps of the state capitol constituted such an event. Friedrich G. (BfG, 71) of Munich got agitated when he read that posters of demonstrators against the local visit by the Pope were confiscated by the police: "It was in the newspaper. And so... (,) I wasn't there myself, but still this infuriated me. And so I wrote to the paper. And in the course of this I became aware of BfG and became a member". Personal experiences that contradict a person's values and expectations may also be experienced as a suddenly imposed grievance. Rainer P. (IBKA, 41), for example, had always believed that religion was nothing to worry about in modern-day, highly secularized Germany, until he asked for the removal of a large crucifix in the classroom of the public elementary school that his young son attended, who seemed to be afraid of the object:

> How a mayor conspires, more or less, with the school district of Cologne in order to keep the crucifixes on the walls of a ridiculously small school of a hundred and fifty kids, how a priest from the pulpit calls for protest marches in front of this school until the crosses get reapplied, and similar things, ...how the local paper deems it worthy of a full page report and their front page that these crosses got removed, well, that... surprised me quite a bit. I didn't expect that. I really didn't expect that. That the opinion of the granny at home regarding the crucifixes in the children's classroom may count more than a supreme court ruling, I didn't expect that either. ...And when I realized all of this, I thought that, indeed, it might make sense to get active.

In other cases, the active spread of information by movement activists in combination with their interpretation of the situation may cause moral shock: "Moral shocks do not arise only from suddenly imposed grievances; organizers try hard to generate them through their rhetorical appeals" (Jasper and Poulsen 1995, 498). Lukas G. (IBKA, 30) and Martin H. (IBKA, 23), for example, consumed the organization's magazine and newsletter for a while before they decided

that it was time to get more involved. But, of course, this framing can only be successful if potential recruits "already have certain visions of the world, moral values, political ideologies, and affective attachments" (Jasper and Poulsen 1995, 496) that match those of the movement. In cases such as these, moral shock does not set in in reaction to a singular event or experience, but in reaction to the perception of a slow and creeping development, a change in cultural values perhaps, which, apart from outrage, causes the feeling of alienation. Typical for the American experience is the observation of the rise of the Religious Right in the years prior to and during the presidency of George W. Bush (see also Fazzino, Borer, and Haq 2014, 176–181). Alice C. expresses well how, prior to her joining of *AOF*, she felt increasingly uncomfortable:

> Early on it was not... something I... gave much... thought to. I would say, in the last fifteen years, though, I've become very aware of it... and... /eh/ almost annually increasingly shocked. And... /eh/ the whole country feels like... East Texas, oughh, pushing this (,) this incessant... need to convert everybody. There's only one religion, and it's theirs and... (,) you know, the sooner you acknowledge that, the better off you'll be. It's uncanny. It's everywhere now. ...Just as it... used to be forty years ago.

Similar to moral shock, and often in combination with it, alienation is a feeling that may lead to self-recruitment. It is an experience which may motivate people to look for others to help them relieve the tension. In addition to the feeling of being at odds with the surrounding culture at large, alienation may also result from more limited experiences of new, confusing, or frustrating situations, from the loss of an old or the adaptation of a new worldview and identity, or simply from moving to a foreign, possibly more religious place.

Whatever their motives for joining, most of the respondents from this study reported that once they had learned of the existence of these organizations they immediately became a member. But in those rare cases, in which doubts were reported, it was often the influence of other persons which convinced them to join eventually. Lee S. (Minnesota Atheists, MNA, 69), a former Evangelical preacher, for example, was originally biased against atheists, and it took him some time and courage to finally attend a few meetings of the organization whose TV programs he had already watched and enjoyed. What finally convinced him to join as a member was the presence of a person he knew, respected, and considered similar to himself:

> And so... my first reaction was: well, I wouldn't want to have anything to do with those... people, but... the more I listened, the more I thought: you know [laughs slightly], I think I have more in common with them than I have with any Christians. So I attended a few meetings. ...And as a matter of fact [...] I walked in the door [...] and I... see a person there and I

suddenly [...] recognize him. ...He was somebody that I went to high school with. [...] And he was a very popular guy in high school. And... so we got to talking. And it turns out, he, too, had been in the ministry [laughs]. And he, too, was ordained. And now he was a member of Minnesota Atheists.

Other doubts about joining had to do with fears that the group might be too similar to religion, that it might be ineffective, or that members might be either too eccentric or intolerant. In some examples, these doubts could be dispelled by the influence and convincing presence of a charismatic leader. Steven F. (AFS, 50) and his wife, for example, had known for a long time of the existence of secularist organizations in the Atlanta area, but had never bothered to join, since they thought that people there might be strange. This changed when they saw an interview with *AFS*' Ed Buckner on TV:

And... Ed was very articulate. An intelligent man. And, so, what he said was (,) was great. I mean, he wasn't shouting, he wasn't pounding his chest, and he wasn't screaming or yelling or any of that kind of thing. He was just very (,) it was a very reasoned and rational... statement that he made. And that immediately appealed to us. And... we just kind of went: hmm, Atlanta Freethought Society? So we wrote that down. And we went and did a google search and found their website.

Finally, Stan C. (San Francisco Atheists, SFA, 45) was impressed by Madalyn Murray O'Hair, the notorious founder of *American Atheists*, who spurred in him the enthusiasm to become an activist:

You know, a lot of these separation organizations don't have much of a sense of humor. You know, somebody like me walks in the room, they go: oh, you know, you should get a haircut! With American Atheists it was just very (,) yeah: you're one of us! Welcome on board! And part of that was the Madalyn O'Hair attitude. So, if Madalyn O'Hair had not been around with her free-wheeling, you know, fuck-you attitude, I probably would not be doing this... myself. But she made it seem cool. She made it seem fun. She made it seem exciting. And she made it seem important. You know? So that's a large part of why I'm doing what I'm doing today.

Activism within the Organization

Due to conscious sampling decisions, interviews were conducted with members with varying degrees of activity in the groups: passive members, whom McCarthy and Zald (1977, 1228) in their member typology call "isolated constituents", as well as weakly, medium, and highly active members. In some cases, the degree of activism may depend on people's experiences with other members. Mariva A.

(SFA, 38), for example, who only sporadically attended meetings of her organization, explained that she could not relate to some of the other members and criticized them for their public demeanor, sharing her experience at a public debate as an example:

> I kind of, ...like, was a little bit embarrassed by the behavior of some of my fellow atheists, for... they were just kind of laughing really loud... and just kind of making comments during the debate. And... all the, like, the Christians were, you know, fairly well behaved. And I was just (,) I was thinking, like: okay, ...you know, if... (,) if we're gonna show that we're as good as these people, like, let's behave that way!

In general, the diversity of characters found in these groups is often cited as a drawback and reason for restraint in commitment. But even those who are the most committed may evaluate this diversity differently. Assunta T. (BfG, 46), for example, criticized the majority of casual members for lacking enthusiasm and sincerity in their atheism:

> Our biggest problem is the nonreligious themselves. [...] They'll actually have the nerve and tolerate that their wives, friends, children... have a different conviction. They treat it as their spare time... (,) their hobby. And hobby only in the sense that if they find the time they may go and attend a meeting. But never make a fuss! They'll only speak up where they feel safe and know that everybody is of the same opinion. That's our trouble!

Stan C. (SFA, 45), on the other hand, felt rewarded by the less active members for his efforts in providing them a place to feel at home at:

> Well, the monthly meetings basically just give people a chance to meet other atheists, give them a chance to relax. Those of us who have been working on it for an entire month get a chance to talk to people who actually care what we're doing [laughs slightly]. You know? So (,) so, it's nice.

These statements show that within the movement there are different expectations regarding organized atheists' openness and candor about their lack of religion. While Assunta expected of her fellow atheists a self-confident demonstration of their rejection of religion, Stan was more tolerant of some of the atheists' fear of ostracism.

Just as these expectations vary, so do the actual practices of concealment or disclosure. Some respondents kept their atheism completely to themselves, while others decided to reveal it only selectively, such as Sharon W. (AFS, 57), who was careful not to appear as a member of *AFS* as long as she was working as a school teacher in the U.S. South. Others, who did not have to fear work-related sanctions, liked to admit to their atheism and seemed to enjoy some of the reactions

they would get. Adrienne M. (SFA, 34), for example, sometimes liked to be seen as a *femme fatale* when going out to bars in her home state of Texas and meeting men:

> and of course they'd be Republican, they would be *so intrigued*... by that fact that I was a (,) a Democrat, and that I was a liberal and that /hughhh/ [gasps] I didn't believe in *god!* That was like I was like this (,) like they were flirting with danger just by hanging out with me or something.

Similarly, Michael C. was amused about a common reaction to his answer for people's question about his church affiliation:

> And you can (,) and you can watch it. Right in their eyes. You can see them like going through... (,) /eh/ it's almost like a computer (,) going through all their files, looking for an appropriate (,) like: what do I do with that? You know? He's an atheist? What? And they're trying to be... polite. Because that's the big thing in the South. You have to always appear to be (,) you can be the biggest bastard in the world, but you have to appear to be polite. And /eh/... (,) you know, they're like: o-o-h...(.) They always make that sound. They're like: o-o-o-h, ...okay. You know? And (,) and I can tell, ...they're like: ...I wonder if he's about to kill me [laughs].

Other than simply answering people's questions about their religion, some respondents talked about regularly confronting people with the fact of their atheism more or less directly. Chuck C. (SFA, 60):

> I travelled a lot when I was working. I would *intentionally*... on an airplane have a book. You know: 'Atheism Understood'. Or something about atheism. That would be my book to carry on the plane. And it wasn't that I really wanted to read that book, but I wanted to invite conversation.

Finally, Assunta (BfG, 46), the leader of *BfG* who advocated for some atheist pride – similar to that of the gay movement – and liked to wear atheist t-shirts and caps in everyday life, even reported that she regularly put invitations to events and political pamphlets by her organization into the business mail of her family's medium-sized company in the car-manufacturing industry.

The organized atheists from this study did not only use different strategies regarding the disclosure of their atheism in everyday life, but they also preferred different strategies for their organizations. Cimino and Smith (2011) argue that the American secularist movement was torn in this respect: "The tension between, on the one hand, spreading secularism and attempting to expose the fallacies of belief and, on the other, seeking acceptance in a largely religious society runs through the recent history of secular humanism" (28). LeDrew (2013,

18 – 19) argues that favoring either a "confrontational" approach, in which criticism of religion and satire are used in order to produce attention and to push certain political goals, or an "accomodationist" approach, which is deemed to further respect and acceptance of atheists, would mirror different ideas about a collective self (see also Fazzino & Cragun in this volume). To my observation, these divergent strategies do not only separate secular humanists from atheists, but they are also associated with different umbrella organizations within the atheist sector. This regularly causes debates within local atheist groups, as described by Don K. (AOF, 53) for the case of *AOF:*

> You know, do we... (,) do we join American Atheists, who for so many years have been (,) who have lived by... ridiculing... religion? ...Or do we take a more... understanding approach, I guess you could call it? The way... the Atheist Alliance International... approaches it, saying: we need to develop... a better connection... with society, so that they will accept us as equals. ...And, you know, so, yeah, it's a (,) it's a constant... conflict that we have in our board meetings. You know, which direction do we go?

At the time this study was conducted, a similar debate took place in the Munich based *BfG* group. Some of the members criticized the group's president, Assunta T., for her provocative style and activism, such as the implementation of a blasphemy contest. Friedrich G. (BfG, 71):

> In any case, she is not a conventional character. Let's put it that way. And she does exhibit that quite a bit. [...] You know, I don't have a problem with that at all. But the fact is, we want to change things. And for that we need the regular citizens. And therefore my opinion is that the current politics are not very favorable, the politics of provocation. ...Because that way we scare away the regular citizens.

Yet, Assunta countered with the opinion that citizens in a democratic society should be able to stand criticism and satire. Accordingly, she advocated a provocative, attention-grabbing strategy, arguing that noble values alone "are not sexy" for the media:

> Those so-called humanistic, secular values, ...they should have actually been societal consensus for a long time. It shouldn't take anything for that. [...] You know? So it's sad enough that we still have to work our asses off for that. And we can only be successful [...] with provocation, of course! ...What else? With provocation. How else do you want to reach anything? That's how the world works. As long as there are things going wrong, we must provoke and trust that in a democratic society democratic-humanistic people will be able to bear that.

But just as atheist blogger Greta Christina (2010) argued that one should "let firebrands be firebrands" and "diplomats be diplomats", voices that saw advantages

in both strategies and even the need for a movement to be pluralistic could also be found.

4 A Typology of Organized Atheists

It has become apparent that goals, strategies, identity labels, as well as world-view biographies vary drastically among organized atheists. The saying commonly used in the movement that "organizing atheists is like trying to herd cats" finds some validation in these results. Still I want to argue that this bulk of highly diverse cases can be reduced to a fair number of characteristic exemplars or ideal types of members.

The typology proposed was achieved by the identification of narrative patterns or "central motives", which consist of typical figures in verbalizations as well as in topical choices and which heavily inform and shape the character of an interview while putting it in line with select others. In order to be seen as central motives these patterns must appear recurrently throughout an interview and especially be present in its "richest" passages (Kruse 2011, 176–179). I have identified four such narrative patterns, which in combination with one of two behavioral patterns or modes of action – one more other-, the other more self-oriented – constitute eight ideal types of organized atheists.

Diagram 1: The eight ideal types of organized atheists

Narrative Pattern / Central Motive	Ideal Type	
	Other-Oriented	*Self-Oriented*
Political Conflict	*Political Fighter*	*Indignant*
Belonging	*Collectivist*	*Alienated*
Philosophical, Scientific, and Religious Knowledge	*Intellectual Enlightener*	*Silent Intellectual*
Identification with Organization	*Dissociate*	*Euphoric*

The Narrative Pattern of "Political Conflict"

The common motive in narrations of members who I will call the "political fighter" and the "indignant" is the narrator's conviction that in the current situation democratic or constitutional principles are violated, as religious ideas or actors are being granted undue influence on the operations of the state or as atheists

and the nonreligious are being discriminated against. This concern is at the heart of these persons' activism, while epistemological questions of religious belief or unbelief are seen as less important or dismissed completely. This overriding principle is represented fairly well in a statement by Adrienne M. (SFA, 34):

> I refuse to debate people on the existence of god. I don't care. Believe whatever you want to believe! Whatever makes you happy, I want you to do it! But you need to keep it out of my government... and off of my body and away from me! ...That's the only reason I do what I do. [...] I've never even read the bible! Okay? I don't care. I can't get past page two. It's boring. ...So I refuse to debate the existence. ...What I do is civil liberties.

Apart from this *political orientation*, the two types of members who are united by this motive show further distinct characteristics which distinguish them from one another.

The Political Fighter: Representatives of this type are characterized by their *disputability*, their conviction of a high degree of *self-effectiveness*, as well as their preference for a *confrontational strategy*. Their activism is strongly outward- or other-oriented. Ed B. (AFS, 62), for example, said that what he loved most about his activism was "to do public speaking and debates". When, during the interview, he reproduced the disputes that he regularly has with people who want the Ten Commandments to be posted in public buildings, he self-ironically remarked: "You can get me on some soap boxes now. I'll preach for a while, if you want me to [laughs]". Similarly, Assunta T. (BfG, 46) described herself as "streitlustig" (cantankerous – literally "argument jolly"), "with an emphasis on 'lustig'" ("jolly"). She shrugged off fears of retributions for an outspoken secularism, as voiced by other members of her organization, with a "pfff" sound, characteristic of her and used many times throughout the interview. As long as nothing worse happened than having ones car's tires punctured, one needed to speak out against religiously motivated violations of individual rights. Assunta, as well as other representatives of the political fighter, stressed that this should be done by oneself rather than waiting for others, such as political parties, to do the job. She said that it was not her style to bemoan a bad situation, but, rather, to do something about it. Besides believing in the effectiveness of political action, political fighters typically also exhibit a strong will and a tendency to make decisions unilaterally. Accordingly, they often take up leading roles in their organizations. As they strongly believe in the legitimacy of their project, they advocate the use of a confrontational strategy in order to get attention.

The Indignant. Representatives of this type are characterized by their indignance. Just as the political fighters, they are *appalled about new developments* regarding the relationship between state and religion or regarding religious in-

trusions on individual liberties. Yet, different from the political fighters, their ambition is less to look strategically for ways to change the political situation in the long run, but rather to look for an outlet to their disgust, for a way to *vent* their *frustration*, which they find in their organizations. Accordingly their activism is of an expressive nature and often rather low-key and sporadic, such as writing letters to the editor, as Jay B. (AFS, 77) does:

> We also have in our local newspaper on a daily basis... a column called vent. And the vent means really, literally, for people to let off steam. ...And it's a... series of what might be called one-liners, in which people would make some comment. And... I have, again, been very (,) pretty successful in having a number of vents printed.

Some other indignants do not get active themselves, but rather want to support financially and give *voice* to political activists, even though they may not believe in the realization of their instrumental goals, as for example Lisa K. (IBKA, 32):

> I don't believe that they can actually achieve a lot. But knowing that there is a voice that says: hello, here, we have an opinion on this, too, does help. That's why I find the work that they do tremendously important.

Representatives of the indignants are often new members as their indignation is usually fresh and connected to a specific current issue. Yet, in other cases, outrage and frustration may be kept up and alive for years, not least by the religion-watch and news services of the organizations themselves.

The Narrative Pattern of "Belonging"

Another central motive that surfaced regularly in some of the interviews is that of belonging. Interviewees who represent the types of the "collectivist" and the "alienated" articulated experiences of estrangement and a – sometimes profound – desire to (re-)connect with others. Mariva A. (SFA, 38), a "Jewish atheist" who, after a religious quest, became a member of *San Francisco Atheists*, but who still enjoyed attending services at a progressive church on Christmas and Easter, got at the heart of this pattern when she remarked:

> And I came home from one of these services, and I told my husband: you know, I think, one (,) maybe *the* reason I've gone to all these different religious... outlets and... services and traditions and rituals is, ...you know, between like the Native American sweat lodge and the Buddhist retreats and, you know, the Quaker meeting house and the gay Jewish synagogue and Glide Memorial Church (,) you know, maybe what I...(.) I thought I was looking for god, but, I think, what I was really looking for and what I *found*... was a connection to

> humanity. [...] And that was sort of a profound realization for me that... you could look at almost any religion and it's sort of a different expression of humanity. You know, the Buddhist tradition is an expression of becoming quiet and becoming grounded and becoming very meditative. And the Native American expression of religion is... about becoming very connected to the earth and to nature. ...You know, and the Jewish expression is (,) is very intellectual. It makes us think. It makes us, you know, buzz with ideas. And, you know, the San Francisco Atheists dinner [...] sort of brings out the misfit in me and makes me feel like, you know, finally we're part of a community where we're not being ostracized.

The term "community" is used frequently in the narratives of both the collectivist as well as the alienated. Both may use the term in two senses – meaning either society at large or the smaller group of the secular community. Yet, for the collectivist the wish to belong is directed more at the former, while for the alienated it is directed more at the latter.

The Collectivist. As atheists, representatives of the collectivist type feel alienated from and misunderstood by the general population. They are driven by the desire to bridge that gap and by the wish to find *community with the greater collective.* As a co-founder of *Atheists and Other Freethinkers*, Mynga F. (AOF, 63) defines this as the group's original goal: "The purpose of AOF... is to... promote civic understanding of atheism... and acceptance of it in our community". Collectivists are looking for common ground with the religious population of their society. One starting point for this is their refusal to criticize religion at large, which, as Paul G. pointed out, did not mean not to protest at all:

> It's not that we won't ever criticize. ...It's simply that we do not lump religion... in one giant lump and therefore say: religion's bad! We can't say that [chuckles], 'cause there are religions that are good. And so... that (,) that's the basic idea.

This differentiating and *benevolent treatment of religion* is not necessarily motivated by strategy. Instead, it may result from personal positive experiences with religion, such as in Paul's case. He did continue his passion for singing in church choirs long after his loss of faith and still enjoys singing church songs together with his wife. Yet, the collectivists ask for the same kind of acceptance by the religious in return. They try to earn this respect, for example, with the help of *charitable activities* that they pursue or that they want their organization to engage in, such as highway cleanups or food drives. In addition, they promote *openness about their worldview* in personal relations. This, according to Don K. (AOF, 53), should help to dispel stereotypes about atheists as anti-social beings, which "church-going people" may have: "They will also learn then to accept atheists as... equal participants in... society, and that we can share... our common humanity... without... embracing a deity".

The Alienated. Others who share the experience of alienation from their surrounding society with the collectivists are less concerned with trying to bridge that gap. Rather than hoping to prove that atheists are respectable members of society, too, their narratives tell of a desire to find a new "home" – be that in social or intellectual terms – a small *community of like-minded people.* This motive is common for (but not exclusive to) members who grew up and used to live in an area where religion mattered little or not at all and who, after moving, suddenly were confronted with a higher degree of religiosity or with religion at all. Heiko T. (MNA, 40), for example, had grown up as the son of a nonreligious father and a moderately religious Lutheran mother in the secularized German Democratic Republic (GDR) / Eastern Germany. After he got divorced from his American wife, whom he had followed to Minnesota after their wedding, he felt lost and foreign there. He reported that during the first two years of his stay in the United States he had mainly been working on his doctoral dissertation and got to know American society mostly via television. What he was presented there on several religious channels was decidedly different from what he knew of religion from back home:

> I actually saw hate there. This was not the kind of Christianity... which teaches love and understanding, you know. It was decidedly directed against atheists... and nonbelievers. You know? Well, to me this was shocking. Also, there were certain aspects of Christianity that I had never heard about, like the Second Coming of Christ and... the rapture, ...things like that. [...] And also, of course, the cultural war of the intelligent design movement. And then there's me with my scientific background. So that hits (,) that hits close to home.

Also, trying to find a new partner after the divorce turned out to be difficult for Heiko, as women were regularly put off by the fact of his nonreligion. Both experiences prompted him to go online and search for other "atheists" in "Minnesota". Martina R. (BfG, 35), who also grew up in the GDR and lived in East Germany for the better part of her life, did not have any experience with religion until she took a job in Bavaria. There she was not only confronted with Catholic street processions, but also with new colleagues who claimed to be religious. This at first unsettled her and she wondered whether, as an atheist, she was missing an important source of support in her life. Yet, she started to develop some atheistic self-esteem after she learned that religion had not saved a particularly faithful colleague of hers from committing suicide. Finally, after seeing a representative from *BfG* in a discussion on television, she soon joined this organization, in order to learn more about a well-reasoned secular position. As in these two cases, the feeling of alienation can be a short-term experience, resulting from a new situation. But it may also become a permanent condition, as for atheists who are surrounded by strongly religious people in their jobs and pri-

vate lives. To them, their organization feels like a safe haven, where they can be "themselves", as Stu T. (MNA, 46) explained:

> In our society religion is (,) you know, like in the workplace and in social settings (,) so it's just largely: hands-off! People don't say anything rather than risk offending somebody. And so it was... (,) I think it was... energizing to just be able to be myself, ...be more of myself and be able to say what I think and to be able to talk about those kinds of subjects and hear, you know, different perspectives and views without... people getting upset.

The Narrative Pattern of "Philosophical, Scientific, and Religious Knowledge"

The two types who, as their main narrative pattern, share an interest in philosophical, scientific, and religious knowledge have a lot in common otherwise, too. Their narrations show a *high degree of self-reflection* and structure. They appear as critical thinkers and they exhibit intellectual curiosity. Both, the "intellectual enlightener" as well as the "silent intellectual", also share the experience of a *religious deconversion*, which they usually interpret as a consequence of their inquisitiveness. David F. (SFA, 43) portrayed this as a necessary connection:

> And... it's just ironic that, if you take... your Christianity seriously enough... to investigate that and to really hold that up, you know, to look for the truth, it will [claps hands] fall apart, if you look at it too close, in my humble opinion.

Joseph H. (MNA, 46), for example, traced his deconversion back to his high school education, for which he attended a Catholic school:

> Now, whereas most high school students didn't particularly care and they just did enough to get by, ...like other subjects, I was really interested. I asked questions. ...Sincerely concerned... teachers and priests gave me books to read. And in doing so, I learned the history of my religion, ...in particular, and all religions in general, and discovered that they all had... very... reasonable, rational histories. Like the history of any... philosophy or political movement or city state or... economic system or whatever. They had a beginning. They had a cause and effect. ...And it wasn't something that was dumped out of the sky. It wasn't something handed down by a deity. And more and more the idea gelled in my mind that... (,) that it had to be that the exact same causative forces that created... the ancient Egyptian gods... and the Roman gods and the Greek gods and the Chinese gods... had to have been the exact same causative forces that had created the Christian god. ...It made sense. ...Ironically, if I had never gone to a Catholic school, I might never have questioned anything.

Others started to investigate religion more closely only later in life, such as Rü-
diger C. (BfG, 69), who in private developed a growing interest in the bible, or
former evangelical preacher Lee S. (MNA, 69), who, over the years, discovered
more and more contradictions in the scripture. What they all have in common,
though, is that after their deconversions they continued their "search for the
truth" and kept up an interest in questions of philosophy, science, and religion.

The Intellectual Enlightener. In addition to this pattern of an interest in phi-
losophy, science, and religion, some of these intellectuals exhibited in their nar-
rations a drive and *desire to actively educate.* Trained biologist and educator
Mynga F. (AOF, 63), for example, who also represents the type of the "collecti-
vist", viewed the public's education about evolutionary theory as a service to
all of society. For this reason she took the Darwin Day event, which her *AOF*
helps to set up each year, to be of premier importance. Others are more con-
cerned with the provision of knowledge about religion, such as Steve Y. (AFS,
54), president of the *Atlanta Freethought Society* at the time, who saw this as
the organization's most important purpose:

> We want people to learn (,) especially people like myself back in 1998, when I was still try-
> ing to figure things out... about religion... and nonreligion... and matters like this. [...] Our
> organization might be able to help them to understand better. And so that's a good thing. I
> *love* (,) I love it when people... come to... that realization and they learn more every day
> about how there are some real problems with religion.

This motive of the "intellectual enlightener" is typical for members who have
had a religious past of their own or who went through an *intense religious
quest.* One example is Grant S. (MNA, 63), a former school teacher, who after
30 years as a Jehova's Witness converted to Catholicism and wrote a doctoral dis-
sertation about cults at a Jesuit university. After having lost religious faith alto-
gether he joined *Minnesota Atheists*, despite his aversion against joining organ-
izations, only in order to be able to educate others about religious cults. In
particular, he had hoped to be able to provide active Jehova's Witnesses with
a dropout's point of view on their religion via *Minnesota Atheists*' media outlets,
such as their cable TV show. Also, he entertained the idea of conducting a tuto-
rial:

> Sort of a class 101, atheism 101, that would give you books and then it would give study
> questions and sort of set it out that you could follow it through and study it. ...Fine
> books that would... aim at where you're at. Because... in my own approach it was sort
> of: catch by catch, whatever happened to be the most accessible. [...] But I think that
> most people are not here. They're here. ...They're not as... educated. And so they need to
> have a program or a way of approaching it. [...] I'm always the teacher, I'm always the ed-
> ucator. And... that's what I want to do... (,) is trying to educate people and to help them.

One reason for the fact that "intellectual enlighteners" seem to be predominantly those members of atheist organizations who used to be strongly religious in their past may be found in Laurence R. Iannaccone's concept of "religious human capital". It builds on the idea that the time, money, and effort spent on religion for religious believers amount to an *investment* in techniques and knowledge, which makes it less likely for them to leave their faith behind:

> The skills and experience specific to one's religion include religious knowledge, familiarity with church ritual and doctrine, and friendships with fellow worshippers. It is easy to see that these skills and experiences, which I will call *religious human capital*, are an important determinant of one's ability to produce and appreciate religious commodities. (Iannaccone 1990, 299, italics in original)

Iannaccone's argument is that these investments over time would make it more and more irrational – and therefore unlikely – for an individual to change his or her religious affiliation, to marry someone of a different faith, or even to deconvert from religion altogether. Obviously this did not hold true for those atheists who used to be very religious in the past. But while, despite all costs, reason and conscience compelled them to leave behind their faith in which they had invested so much, they still discovered a chance to apply at least parts of their religious human capital in sharing their religious knowledge with others. David F. (SFA, 43), a former evangelical Christian who at the time of the interview participated in religious-secular dialogue projects and authored a book on the historicity of Jesus, even voiced his wish to convert this element of his religious capital into economic capital:

> What I hope to do (,) you know, if the magic career fairy came down and granted me my wish, I would be on, like, the lecture circuit... or some sort of teaching position, you know. ... I think I'd be... really good as a teacher and...(,) I mean, people really seem to enjoy my public speaking. ...And that's what I'd like to get paid for.

The Silent Intellectual. The adjective "silent" characterizes the representatives of this type only regarding their treatment of philosophical, scientific, and religious knowledge. Compared with the intellectual enlighteners, interviewees who exhibited this narrative pattern were far less eager to share their knowledge, but rather to be educated further themselves. They showed a high and generalized *ambition to learn*. One case in point is Joseph H., who answered the general biographical question about the most important stages in his life so far by talking extensively about experiences that shaped his way of thinking. Other biographical events, like meeting and marrying his wife or having a daughter, instead, appeared only as an afterthought:

> For some reason they don't... jump out exactly as turning points in my life, because in certain ways they didn't really... affect my world outlook, perhaps. They weren't... (,) they were very important and emotional... parts of my life, but they really didn't... teach me anything. I really haven't learned anything. I really wasn't *transformed*... by the experience of becoming a father or being married.

The silent intellectuals like their organizations for the chance to meet others that may be of a similar intellectual orientation as well as for being able to attend presentations on various scientific and philosophical topics. Some, like Rüdiger C. (BfG, 69), particularly enjoy their group's library, which enables them to study criticism of religion and its history systematically. Accordingly, Kenneth N. (AOF, 56) believed that he would leave *AOF* only in the case that he would not be able to learn anything new there any longer:

> I like AOF because I'm always learning things. And that's when I'm happiest, when I'm learning something. ...Yes, it's an educational... pursuit. It's a way of expanding my mind. And I think, if I ever left AOF, it would be because... I felt that my mind is no longer growing.

The Narrative Pattern of "Identification with the Organization"

While the narrative patterns introduced so far were characterized primarily by members' motivations for affiliating with their organizations (political protest, community, education), the narrations of the two remaining types of members were shaped more strongly by how they positioned themselves toward their groups. All of these interviewees felt compelled to negotiate the relationship with their organization as a means of performing a segment of their personality that they identified with very strongly. Substantially, these interviews were diametrically opposed to each other, though, as they were characterized either by vehement rejection of or full-blown compliance with the atheist organization.

The Dissociate. All of the organizations explored have a fair share of nominal or passive members. With their membership, they only wish to support the goals of the movement symbolically or financially or they merely wish to be informed by their group's newsletter or magazine. This does not make them "dissociates" in the sense discussed here. Rather, the members classified as such actively *reject identification* with their atheist group, some of its practices, and members. This rejection results from a *value central to the person's identity* which he or she does not see fulfilled or represented by the other atheists and their organizations. Interviewees who exhibit this pattern also exhibit a certain amount of

generalized distrust and accuse the atheists of some of the same mistakes that they accuse the religious of. Marco P. (AFS, 65), for example, identified predominantly as a mystic. By this he meant a person who did not believe without questioning, but who was open still to new experiences and insights. Persons, who would jump to conclusions or unconditionally cling to their convictions, he called "stupid" – a term that occurred frequently throughout his interview. One of his fields of interest was that of near-death experiences. He had offered the board of directors at *AFS* to give a talk on the topic, but at the time of the interview he was certain that this would be rejected, as many atheists deemed the field to be unscientific. This "closed-mindedness", Marco said, made him just as angry as bans on the teaching of evolution, which he experienced in his career as a lecturer in anthropology:

> I don't react well to people who try to limit my freedom. And, essentially, what you've been hearing me say about the Atlanta Freethought Society... is that... it seems to me that there are some... in there that have their own very, very narrow view of what free is. ...If they really were free*thought*... they would be *really* open to all thought. But... I don't have the opinion that they are.

While Marco P. felt threatened by "stupid people" who wanted to limit his freedom, the central issue in Mona T.'s (IBKA, 69) narration is her rejection not only of Christians, but also of conservatives and sexist men – who, in her experience, tended to appear in personal union and who she deemed responsible for most bad things that ever happened to her. Even though in *IBKA* there were no Christians, she reported that she still grew critical of the group:

> Because I think the *only* ones who can *really* do anything against those dreadful religions are the leftists... and women. They have the most reason. And both are heavily discriminated against in this organization. ...Being leftist is treated as bad. And women are in the minority. [...] I pity that. But I am still going to stick with IBKA, because otherwise it would only be one less – one leftist and one woman.

Finally, Wolfram B. (IBKA, 55), who was mainly active in the anarchist and pacifist movements, was discouraged from further attending *IBKA* meetings not only by procedures there, such as podium discussions, that he deemed too hierarchical for his taste, but also by the fact that he was not able to recruit new members for the pacifist movement:

> Well, of course, who votes for Social Democrats is not interested in peace and who votes for the Greens goes to war as well. Let me put it that way [laughs slightly]. So, my topic is a minority issue, I know. ...That was obvious. No one showed any interest in it.

Therefore, Wolfram himself developed no interest in engaging with atheism more actively and remained distant. Polletta and Jasper (2001) see a reason for the phenomenon that people sometimes associate themselves with movements whose members they criticize in the fact that "(c)ollective identity is not the same as common ideological commitment. One can join a movement because one shares its goals without identifying much with fellow members (one can even, in some cases, despise them)" (298). To that effect, Marco P. (AFS, 65) stressed that before joining *AFS* he did not think "{{with feigned voice, soft} ooohhh, I'm going to meet people like me. And I'm gonna feel so at home and so comfortable.} Bullshit!" Instead, he said, he only wanted to make a statement:

> I have no... interest in stupidity. ...So, I don't run around looking for stupid groups. I joined... this particular... Atlanta Freethought Society not because I thought these people were... smart and had any answers, but because I (,) ...mainly I thought it was a way of me doing... what I think is morally proper. Me saying: hey, here's another number you can put on your membership list to show that not everybody in this god-damn country is a simple-minded evangelical.

The Euphoric. In contrast, representatives of the euphoric feel completely at home in their atheist activism. Their *identity as atheist* is at the center of their personality. With the freethought-secularist movement they have found a platform with the help of which to act out on this aspect of their identity. This ideal type is characterized by three motives: the *public self-presentation as atheist* in activist as well as everyday situations, the *conviction of being part of a victorious movement*, and the characterization of *religion as psychosis* and mental imprisonment. David M. (SFA, 77) represented the prototypical euphoric:

> I got an atheist cap. It says American Atheists up here. I got that at one of the conventions. And... a reporter from the Chronicle interviewed me... and took my picture and... (,) and this actually was at an atheist meeting, I believe, in Berkeley. They were discussing something... about atheism or something the government is doing. And this reporter was there and... took my picture. And I've been in parades. I've been in a lot of parades... holding... a banner or something. And I give out these pins [pins with the word "GOD" crossed out].

It is obvious that David enjoyed presenting himself as an atheist in public. In contrast to many other American atheists, he happily had his picture taken for a newspaper. Also, he liked to be present and honk his horn at demonstrations, the actual cause of which seems to be less important to him. He fashioned himself an "atheist preacher", who, for example, sings atheist blues songs and plays his harmonica at a night club or who advertises his book, "Atheist Acrimonious", in everyday situations, such as while inquiring about car insurance on the

phone. This ambition results from his idea that atheism constitutes a superior and, in the long run, victorious worldview. David typically argued for this view with a mixture of serious and tongue-in-cheek arguments:

> Atheists have more fun. You have more enjoyment being an atheist. You're happier being an atheist. ...And [laughs] (,) and, of course, if you're talking to another guy, says: you can drink more without guilt. I mean, you can have another beer! ...And drink more whiskey! Shit, you got 'em right there [laughs]! ...Or you talk to the women and says: ...did you know that the atheist men are the handsomest men in the world? They're a lot more handsomer than these Catholics. You know? ...Tell 'em any god-damn thing! It don't matter. As long as you get their attention.

Of these arguments, David was at least convinced of the greater happiness that atheists would enjoy. His happiness about his own atheism and his enthusiasm to advertise for it result from his past, when, he claimed, he suffered from "god phobia". Having finally concluded that the god he used to be afraid of did not exist, to him, accordingly, felt like an enormous liberation: "And I've been elated and happy about it... ever since that... I just can't get over it. I am so happy [laughs]."

5 Conclusion

The phenomenon of "new atheism" at the beginning of the 21 century has led to a growing academic and public visibility of a freethought-secularist movement, whose protagonists have sometimes been called "militant" or "zealous atheists" (Gray 2008; Platzek 2011). Apart from the general problem that "militancy" is a mischaracterization of stringent criticism, my exploration of German and American atheist organizations has revealed that the membership of these groups is much more pluralistic – regarding degrees of and motivations for members' activism, their views on strategies and openness, as well as their worldviews and worldview formation. A certain degree of zeal may only be ascribed to members that I characterized as the "political fighter", the "euphoric", and, to some degree, the "intellectual enlightener". In general, organized atheists' activism may be either other- or self-oriented, it may follow political, communal, or educational goals, and it may seek confrontation or accommodation. Also, some of the members may be very critical not only of religion, but also of their fellow atheists and atheist organizations.

This plurality was present in both the American as well as the German organizations. One exception, at least in my sample, was the ideal type of the "euphoric", whose prototypical representative I only found in one of the American

groups. While this may be mere coincidence, I would like to argue that a systematic difference between organizations from the two countries can be found with respect to the narrative pattern of "belonging". Even though the study's design does not allow for quantitative comparisons, it is noteworthy that this narrative pattern was much more common in the American interviews. There may be a structural reason for this tendency, and it may have to do with the "ubiquity of theism" (Smith 2011) in U.S. society and the more charismatic and expressive character of American religiosity. It has been reported that these factors make the American atheist identity a rejection identity faced with stigma and ostracism. Accordingly, the main reason for joining atheist organizations so far (looking at American cases only) has been seen in the management of a non-normative identity through association with like-minded people – either with the aim of fighting the stigma, or with the aim of banding together. While important in the American context, this is less of a motive in the case of Germany, where non-religion and atheism are not uncommon and faced with less of a stigma. Accordingly, this exploration has shown that there exist further motivations for secularist activism – namely political outrage and intellectual curiosity – which can be found in both countries alike.

Finally, the difference in religious vitality between the two countries overall may be responsible for the most striking difference between the German and the American atheist organizations. The latter proved to be a lot more vivid. Even though in both countries I consciously sampled organizations that offered their members chances for getting active politically as well as for socializing, the German groups studied offered social events and meetings much less regularly and less frequently than the American ones. Efforts at organizing informal meet-ups within the German groups were generally short-lived and charitable activism not considered necessary. Therefore, except for the preparation of the newsletter, the more active members tended to only meet irregularly, such as for occasional political protest, for outreach at progressive festivals (such as Labor Day or gay pride events), for an occasional lecture or book discussion, and for their groups' annual conferences. In contrast, the American groups featured not only their monthly meetings, but also dinner clubs, book clubs, charitable as well as a plethora of other activities. Even though national differences in civic cultures may also play a role here, it seems more likely that the degree of religiosity present in a culture determines heavily the degree of activism in atheist organizations, which on all other counts are so similar to one another.

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