Revisiting Sacred Metaphors

A Religious Studies Pedagogical Response to the Rise of the Nones

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Abstract

The emergence of the religious nones can create pedagogical challenges due to the multifarious and institutionally disaffiliated nature of this classification. Thus, this article supplies a potential pedagogical technique by revisiting Peter Berger's sacred canopy metaphor. We submit that the religious nones can be understood functionally and structurally by employing "sacred metaphors" based on the sacred canopy. Three metaphors are provided herein to address the three central categories of the nones: unaffiliated believers, agnostics, and atheists. We introduce these sacred metaphors, detail their relevance, and suggest that these "sacred metaphors" present a new way of explaining the complexities of classifying the religious nones.

Introduction

A consensus regarding a definition of religion has eluded religion scholars since the early stages of the religious studies field. A religious studies scholar might analytically approach religion in her own way, develop pedagogical techniques to discuss religion and its many features in her own context, or engender her own definition by amalgamating features from previous resources. In response to the plethora of available definitions of religion, some scholars have attempted to explain religion by employing metaphors.

This paper proposes to advance the conversation regarding what we refer to as "sacred metaphors," or word pictures attempting to provide a fundamental analogy for understanding religion. We shall briefly discuss two of the most well-known metaphors – Peter Berger's "sacred canopy" and Christian Smith's "sacred umbrellas." These two metaphors have played a vital role in how many scholars and students have understood religious systems. We posit that both metaphors, as thorough as they appear, are inadequate in light of the recent rise of religious nones (those who report no religious affiliation). Thus, we examine the three dominant categories of the religious nones and propose three new metaphors for religious structure of these three groups. Our intent is not to reject previous metaphors or to provide comprehensive religious metaphors, rather we hope to expand the conversation pertaining to the functionality and structure of metaphors of religion and possibly provide new heuristic devices for those instructing religious studies courses – specifically introductory religion courses.

Sacred Metaphors in Religious Studies

In 1967, Peter Berger introduced the concept of the "sacred canopy." Berger's sacred canopy metaphor painted a word picture for the functionality of religion. He proposed that religion serves to supply a legitimation against world disrupting anomie. By anomie, Berger meant anything disrupting the normal flow of a socially-constructed existence including natural phenomena, war, disaster, and death. Thus religion "permits the individual . . . to exist in the world of his society – not 'as if nothing had happened,' which is psychologically difficult in the more extreme marginal situations but in the 'knowledge' that even these events or experiences have a place within a universe that makes sense" (44). Given the legitimating force of the sacred canopy, Berger suggested that humankind maintains the sacred canopy to serve as a barrier against the chaos that all humans will eventually face – ultimately death. Consequently, the sacred canopy supplies meaning for these events. In sum, the sacred canopy provides the community epistemological reasoning to proceed with life as they know it, even in the event of disruptions.

Thus Berger's functionality of religion encompasses sacrosanct, communal, and protective characteristics. These three elements fit nicely into Berger's sacred canopy metaphor. Berger suggests that the canopy is sacred in the sense that it provides epistemological and teleological assurance in this world. As such, sacred is utilized as a way of describing a clarification of unexplainable events and access to, otherwise inaccessible, justifications. The second half of the analogy refers to the communal aspect of religion. The analogy denotes that historically religion has been a shared venture imparting all the aforementioned sacred elements not simply to an individual, but to the collective. Thus, the canopy furnishes a fairly complete picture of religious functionality and structure drawing an image of a collective tribe huddled under the protective barrier attempting to escape, examine, and explain the inevitable dangers and death in this world. And if earthly dangers and death do impose themselves upon the collective (which they inevitably will), the canopy provides an explanatory barrier.

Berger's metaphor is important, not only because it provides wonderful symbolism for the role of religion, but because it was an early attempt to develop a "sacred metaphor." By sacred metaphor, we simply mean the development of an image to describe the function of

religion, while not intending to imply a consecrated nature to the metaphor itself. Like Talal Asad's statement, "there cannot be a universal definition of religion" (29), we posit that, likewise, no metaphor describing the functionality and structure of religion could ever be comprehensive; therefore, we admit that the proposed sacred metaphors herein inherently include a limitation in application.

As religion changes, inevitably, the modes of religion are altered. Hence, more recently, Christian Smith modified Berger's sacred metaphor to describe the structural formation of religion contemporarily in the United States. Almost as an aside in his work, *American Evangelicalism, Embattled and Thriving*, Smith proposed a metaphor of "sacred umbrellas" (106-107). His metaphor echoes much of Berger's with one major exception – Smith advances that religion in the United States has become a utility for a smaller-scale collective, abandoning macro-level collective meaning. In essence, "people don't need macro-encompassing sacred cosmoses to maintain their religious beliefs. They only need 'sacred umbrellas,' small, portable, accessible relational worlds . . . 'under' which their beliefs can make complete sense" (106). Given that Smith's analytical focus was on evangelicalism in the United States, which maintains individual soteriology and has ingeniously adapted to the religious marketplace (Lee and Sinitiere), the sacred umbrella metaphor adequately describes the clustering of evangelical devotees into enclaves.

Yet the two metaphors additionally denote something interesting about the nature of religion (and of metaphors). The modes of religion, when in flux, create a need for scholars to reconsider and develop additional sacred metaphors in response to the changing arrangements of religion. Simply stated, one sacred metaphor cannot adequately encapsulate the myriad (and shifting) structures of religion. Indeed, broadly speaking, religion is changing in the United States. Adherents seek religion for many reasons and, as a result, religion is taking new forms. This holds true for many contemporary devotees, but quite possibly is more applicable for those categorized as the religious nones.

The Nones, Characteristic Similarities

The religious landscape in the United States currently is more diverse than it has ever been. A significant portion of this diversity is due to the fact that rates of religious affiliation in the United States have been dropping significantly since the 1990s (Pew Forum 2009; WIN-Gallup International; Putnam and Campbell: 121-22). The group of U.S. Americans who reject traditional religious labels has become known as the "nones" (Putnam and Campbell). The percentage of those who claim no religion has grown even more rapidly in the U.S. over the past few years, from 16% in 2007 to nearly 20% in late 2012 (Pew Forum 2012). This swift and drastic movement away from traditional religious affiliations has rightfully spurred much debate and research regarding the causes and implications of the rise of the nones.

Many scholars have explored the social characteristics and tendencies of the nones in the U.S. As we will discuss in detail below, the nones are not a homogeneous or monolithic group. Still, they tend toward certain sociological features. For example, several studies have corroborated that "men, younger [people], those without children, those with higher levels of education, and those with a more liberal political stance are all more likely to claim no

religion" (Baker and Smith 2009b: 1257). Scholars have offered a number of interpretations of these characteristics.

Nonreligion tends to be a male dominated orientation. Obviously this is (along with all of the following tendencies) only a statistical generalization and there are many exceptions. On the whole, men are more likely than women to be atheists (Cheyne and Britton) and are less likely to report themselves as being religious (Zuckerman: 10). Some have suggested that certain personality traits that are more common in men may explain their higher rates of nonreligion. For example, men are on average less adept at "mentalizing" and, therefore, may be less likely to adopt religious perspectives that involve a belief in unseen personalities such as gods, spirits, and demons (McCauley: 264-68).

Young Americans are much more likely to report no religious affiliation than are Americans of previous generations. In fact, the younger the individual, the more likely she will report no religious label. Nearly a third (32%) of younger Millennials (born between 1990 and 1994) report no religion, while only 5% of the Greatest Generation (born between 1913 and 1927) identifies as nonreligious (Pew Forum 2012). Greater amounts of nonreligion in young Americans seems to be the consequence of both "generational replacement" and disaffection of younger individuals who were raised within a religious tradition (Pew Forum 2012).

Another commonality of religious nones is their lack of binding social ties. Parenthood increases the statistical likelihood that one will claim a religious affiliation (Baker and Smith 2009b: 1257). Some have claimed that the lack of social obligations, such as marriage, strong friendships, and even stability of one's place of residence, are correlated with the likelihood that one will hold an atheistic worldview (Bainbridge). The question of whether or not these correlations represent causal relationships (and if so, which direction the causation goes) is still open, but the correlation is undeniable.

Education, with regard to the religious nones, is a complex characteristic. Across the board, the religiously unaffiliated only rank slightly higher than the general public in terms of education (Pew Forum 2012: 33). However, those who identify as "atheist" and "agnostic" (sub-groups within the religious nones, which we will discuss below) rate higher on these measures than other religious nones. "Fully 44% of atheists and agnostics have at least a college degree, compared with . . . 28% of the general public" (Pew Forum 2012: 35).

The average "none" also leans to the left politically. This politically liberal orientation of nones is especially pronounced on the hot-button social issues of abortion and same-sex marriage. "Nearly three in four [nones] say abortion should be legal, compared to 53 percent of all Americans. A slightly smaller number (73 percent) favor same-sex marriage (compared to 48 percent of all Americans)" (Winston). Some have interpreted this as evidence that the rise of the nones is, at least partially, a reaction to the political influence of the Christian Right in the 1970s and 80s (Putnam and Campbell: 127; Baker and Smith 2009b: 1252). Some, operating under this interpretation, have concluded that disaffiliating with organized religion may be a "political" decision for some individuals (Hout and Fischer: 188).

While all the tendencies that we addressed above may seem to suggest homogeneity among the nones, this is not the full picture. Nones may be statistically similar in terms of

social demographics, but they are anything but homogeneous in terms of worldview. Citing "none" or "nothing in particular" on a survey question regarding religious affiliation conveys very little regarding the individual's beliefs about the world. While traditional religious labels (e.g., "Catholic," "Muslim," etc.) are broad enough to cover many different worldviews and dispositions (some of which are mutually exclusive within the same category), citing "none" only indicates respondents' rejection of the most prominent religious categorizations (constructed by researchers). A staunch atheist who despises religion and a new-age mystic may both count as nones. For this reason, a further taxonomic breakdown of subgroups within the nones is necessary.

Typological Distinctions

As mentioned above, the term "nones" may suggest a united group that holds a certain non-religious ideological bent. This intuitive picture, as many scholars have noted, is incomplete and incorrect. Nones run the gamut in terms of both beliefs and behavior with regard to religion (see Zuckerman; Putman and Campbell; Winston; Baker and Smith 2009b). Although some atheist apologists have suggested that the rise of the nones represents a victory for atheism (Friendly Atheist), any conflation of nones and atheists is misleading. A further typological breakdown of nones is needed. "The need for subcategories arises out of the fact that claiming no religion is an identity question that essentially determines whether an individual claims to be part of an established religious group. Atheism and agnosticism, on the other hand, are a matter of belief" (Baker and Smith 2009a: 720). We have chosen to adopt Baker and Smith's taxonomy of nones, which includes three groups: atheists, agnostics, and unchurched believers (Baker and Smith 2009a: 720-21).[1]

These three subcategories of nones deserve brief discussion, after which, we will suggest fresh metaphors in order to illustrate the functionality of religion within each subcategory. First, the majority of nones fall into the subcategory of "unchurched believers." That is to say, most people in the U.S. who reject any particular religious label still hold religious beliefs. Belief in god(s), spirits, and other "superempirical" phenomena are still important parts of these individuals' worldviews.[2] A smaller portion of nones identify as agnostics. The term agnostic has come to express ignorance with regard to superempirical (particularly religious) beliefs. While agnostics do not affirm concepts such as god(s), souls, etc., neither do they explicitly deny them. Finally, those who identify as "atheist" are the smallest block of nones, and has been the focus of a disproportionate amount of research. Atheists explicitly deny the existence of god(s) and, presumably, of the superempirical more generally. Each of these subdivisions (like all categorizations) admits of exceptions, seeming contradictions, and blurred lines. However, these typological distinctions, along with the metaphors offered below, can aid us in detangling the overly amorphous category of nones.

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[1] Baker and Smith's trifold categorization of the nones is common, but is not the only taxonomy on offer. Lim, MacGregor, and Putnam discuss the nones in terms of "liminality," making the case that *how long* individuals identify as "nones" is an under-researched and underappreciated aspect of non-religion.

[2] We recognize the emphasis on belief is partially a product of Christian Protestantism, but it is common in American religion in general.

Unchurched Believers and the Sacred Matrix

Methods of analyzing religiosity in the United States have typically focused on religious affiliation and participation in a religious denomination. Consequently, researchers have relied on fairly complex classification systems, most notably Tom Smith's denominational classification system and the religious tradition classification system (RELTRAD) (T. Smith; Steensland, Park, Regnerus, Robinson, Wilcox, and Woodberry). Yet as the religious nones continue to increase in the American religious landscape, the "unchurched believer" (sometimes referred to as the "unaffiliated") has created a scholarly impetus to reevaluate data gathering techniques (Dougherty, Johnson, and Polson). This is not without merit. The category of unchurched believers includes "those who report traditional religious beliefs while being disenfranchised from organized religion" (Baker and Smith 2009b: 1260). Those falling into the category of "unchurched believer" refuse to list any religious affiliation and most likely do not participate in an organized religious community (Markham). This non-affiliation yields a classification as a religious none, but most unchurched believers "report that they believe in God or a higher power" (Baker and Smith 2009a: 721). Unchurched believers perceive no paradox in maintaining religious practices privately rather than publicly (see Heelas 2002; 2006).

The religiously private nature of unchurched believers creates a difficulty in analyzing their beliefs, attitudes, and practices. For instance, how does a researcher find unchurched believers to survey or interview when there is no formalized gathering? This arduousness of evaluation has left a deficiency in data and research focused on religious nones (see Vernon), but recent data is starting to develop a clearer picture of unchurched believers. Researchers Hout and Fischer write that "[the religious nones'] quarrel was not with God but with people running organized religion. They expressed little or no confidence in religious leaders and churches, and many saw them as the source of conflict and intolerance" (178). Additionally, unchurched believers are a vastly more liberal group as compared to their religious predecessors (Putnam and Campbell). Many suspect that the rejection of institutionalized religion and progressive leanings by unchurched believers on social issues are correlated as a repudiation of a perceived politicization of religion. In short, what we do know about unchurched believers is that they (1) are not monolithic in their religious beliefs, (2) are more liberal on moral issues, and (3) do not associate with religious institutions and organizations.

This complex group can be difficult to assimilate into Berger's sacred canopy and Smith's sacred umbrella. One of the most important aspects of religion for Berger and Smith is the idea that the adherents are "under" the religion, which supplies a derived ontological aspect fostering a collective and individual reasoning for continued existence. Unchurched believers have seemingly forsaken organized religion and formal religious dogmas and, instead, maintain diverse religious beliefs while coming out from under the protective canopy or umbrella. Thus, we propose that for unchurched believers, religion structurally can be conceived of as a sacred matrix, a more organic, non-hierarchal network not based on a formal set of doctrinal beliefs, but rather on shared (humanistic) values.

To further develop the word picture, one could imagine a large tent utilized for religious gatherings (in the American South these are referred as religious revivals). As a metaphor, the poles of the tent could represent the doctrinal foundations securing the canopy in place.

The canopy itself could represent a composition of collective assent fulfilling a need to be secure, and, again, a protective barrier between the adherent and the unknown, which supplies meaning and purpose. We suggest that because unchurched believers disavow institutionalized religion, the sacred matrix has no need for theses doctrinal physical supports or for the canopy itself. This rejection is due, first, to the idea that the sacred matrix is no longer geographically dependent. The advancement of the Internet and social media provides an accommodating resource for unchurched believers to connect and engage with others sharing their views. For many, this contact might be interdenominational in nature (e.g., a Methodist communicating with a Pentecostal), but the matrix allows for an expansion and integration of other religious concepts.

Berger and Smith's metaphors of canopy and umbrella are utilized as epistemological functions providing assurance and protection. We propose that for unchurched believers science has displaced the need for explaining anomie (i.e., weather disruptions, disasters, and death). Instead, the most highly valued function of religion for unchurched believers is simply the superempirical information regarding the divine and human connections. Hence we propose the metaphor of a "sacred matrix" demonstrating a lack of protective material (canopy or umbrella) or rigid doctrinal foundations (no defined structural support poles). The distrust of institutionalized religion is correlated to a distrust of doctrinal certainty, which cultivates an attitude of interfaith acceptance and cooperation.

An example of unchurched believers who embrace a sacred matrix type religiosity is that of the Emerging Church (EC). In many ways, it is difficult to categorize the EC because it is not a traditional denomination connected through common beliefs. Rather, it is an interfaith movement spanning the theological and doctrinal spectrum. Although the movement started from within the evangelical branch of Christianity, it now includes participants from Mainline Protestants, Charismatics, and Catholic churches, but also from Judaism and Islam. Theologically, the EC draws from a variety of theological resources, including N. T. Wright, Lesslie Newbigin, and Catholic missionary Vincent Donovan. Philosophically, it relies heavily on the postmodern and deconstruction philosophies of Jacques Derrida and Richard Rorty (Jones: 41). Using a diversity of resources, both religious and nonreligious, the EC emphasizes creating social contexts that foster freedom of thought, which results in a wide-variety of beliefs.

The EC considers itself a conversation, a network, or a friendship. The Emergent Village website, an information center that allows members to connect, describes the movement as "A Growing, Generative Friendship." The network is not exclusive; anyone is invited into the conversation to discuss his or her religious narrative with no assumption of eventual conversion. The network is based on the organizational notion that there are no official leaders, offices, or institutional guidelines. In essence, there is no standard model. Consequently, Scot McKnight describes the EC as having a "post-systematic theology" and says this is because "no language is capable of capturing the Absolute Truth who alone is God." Putnam and Campell suggest that there is a possibility the EC will be the religious home of the "nones" or those that claim no religious affiliation. They suggest, "The emerging church appears to be precisely the sort of religion we would have predicted to reach the new nones – evangelically flavored, but without the connections to right-wing politics" (179).

This brief introduction of the Emerging Church demonstrates the utility in thinking through religion as a sacred matrix based on social connectivity, forsaking old forms of religious construction and political engagement, and yet, retaining certain religious precepts. Taking note of the EC demonstrates that old forms of religious classification are limited in measuring the religiosity of unchurched believers. By understanding religion as structurally anew in a pluralistic context, we acknowledge that our instruction of religious modes should also be modified. The sacred matrix provides a metaphorical paradigm to instruct students regarding the social role of religion in an ever-increasing pluralistic context.

The Sacred Quilt of the Agnostics

Closely related to unchurched believers is the categorical group called agnostics. Although these two groups share several commonalities, they also integrate nuanced differences. While the vast majority of those who reject any conventional religious label can be classified as "unchurched believers," some nones have reservations about more than just religious institutional structures and organizations. Those who identify as "agnostic," as we noted above, do not explicitly affirm or deny the superempirical features of religious doctrines and beliefs. Agnostics may believe that answers to the metaphysical questions that religions claim to provide are impossible to acquire, or simply, that they personally do not possess such answers. The most prominent religious metaphysical question (in both popular and academic work) is, "Is there a god?" Those who pass on answering such questions comprise almost 17% of nones and 3.3% of the total U.S. population (Pew Forum 2012). Agnostic nones are, on the whole, less antagonistic toward religion than atheistic nones (Cheyne and Britton: 1). However, agnostics do hold reservations about religions, falling "on the same side" of the issue as atheists, albeit less vehemently (Cheyne and Britton: 4). "Atheists and agnostics overwhelmingly view religion's declining influence as a good thing for society" (Pew Forum 2012).

Agnostics' lower levels of hostility toward religion and spirituality "manifest themselves in differences between the two groups on private religiosity and spirituality" (Baker and Smith 2009a: 722). Agnostics are much more likely than atheists to consider themselves "spiritual" (Cheyne and Britton: 6). While agnostics may not identify explicitly with the theistic or supernatural elements of conventional religions, some hold that there are "deep truths in religions, but these may well not be the truths that the religions themselves officially proclaim" (Gutting). They may acknowledge the social, communal, and moral advantages of religions without committing to the metaphysical or theological features of religious belief systems. In light of agnostics' higher levels of self-described "spirituality" and openness to non-theological benefits of religions, we pose the metaphor of the "sacred quilt" to illustrate the relationship of agnostic nones to religion in the U.S.

A quilt, being a blanket made from various pieces of cloth that have been stitched together into a new and unique whole, is an apt metaphor for agnostic nones' relationships with religion. Agnostics, like all nones, no longer stand beneath a sacred canopy that covers like-minded religious group members. Instead, they have opted to craft their own unique orientation to religion. Rarely do they invent it whole cloth. More often, agnostics stitch together various practices, notions, questions, and stories from previously existing religious

traditions. These diverse features may come from one religion, possibly the religion that the individual was raised with, or from different religions with which the person has had contact.

In fact, we propose that it is the historical connections and inherited belief systems that agnostics often are displaying with the sacred quilt. Agnostics may not affirm all religious beliefs represented by the sacred quilt, but they often maintain respect for traditions of the past. The sacred quilt, we suggest, may function as a display of identity as it is formed of pieces passed down through family or cultural ties. However, other pieces of the quilt may express the distinctiveness of the individual's identity in contrast to her social context (e.g., "pieces" of the quilt that the individual has come across, but do not originate in her own cultural setting). The sacred quilt also can be (like other "sacred" coverings) used to reassure the individual in times of distress or uncertainty. So, the sacred quilt has the potential for use as both a display and a covering.

The germ of the idea for our "sacred quilt" metaphor is found within Christian Smith's suggested "sacred umbrella" image. Smith acknowledges that the monolithic sacred canopy is no longer operative for many in the modern world. He writes, "as the old, overarching sacred canopies split apart and their ripped pieces of fabric fell toward the ground, many innovative religious actors caught those falling pieces of cloth in the air and, with more than a little ingenuity, remanufactured them into umbrellas" (106). In suggesting this updated metaphor, we attempt to emphasize the *quilted* nature of the coverings used by many agnostics. Sacred quilts are not only made of "falling pieces of cloth," but also from cloth found on the ground as one travels through life. For example, an agnostic who was raised in the Christian tradition may come across notions or values from the Islamic sacred canopy, which she then uses to stitch together her unique form of agnostic religiosity.

This metaphor aids us in situating the phenomenon of agnostics who attend religious services and have spiritual practices. One study, which examined the religious dispositions of scientists, who are more likely to be non-religious than the average U.S. citizen (Ecklund: 15-16), found that many scientists who are nones participate in religious activities for superempirical reasons. For example,

> A biologist said that [by attending religious services] she was simply looking for a place where her family could just be part of a community with other families, rather than a place where a specific religious ethic would be passed on to her children. This biologist does not believe in "God as a personality." She thinks it is important to be kind to others and "love thy neighbor as thyself," which she sees as residual beliefs from her Christian upbringing. She draws meaning of life from her scientific understanding (Ecklund and Lee: 738).

Other reasons non-theist scientists in this study cited for being involved with religious practices included rituals, morals, values, aesthetics, potential intellectual stimulation for children, and maintenance of culture (Ecklund and Lee: 736, 739).

In the interest of avoiding an overly simplified reading of our metaphorical suggestions, we acknowledge that the "sacred quilt" metaphor could also be used in capturing the nature of some atheistic nones' relationship with religion. For example, one might stitch a sacred

quilt out of some of the communal or moral elements of religions while explicitly denying the existence of the superempirical (Ecklund and Lee: 735). We simply use the "sacred quilt" metaphor to illuminate agnostics' relationships with religion due to the fact that agnostics tend, on the whole, to be less antagonistic toward and more engaged with religions and spirituality. However, we maintain that, while the sacred quilt metaphor *may* describe some atheists' dispositions toward religion, many atheists are very troubled by what they see as the negative consequences of religion. These atheist nones require a fresh metaphor of their own.

Atheists and Sacred Rain Boots

The vast majority of nones hold some kind of belief in the superempirical. A smaller segment maintains either that superempirical things cannot be known or, at least, that they do not know whether they believe in such things. When categorized in terms of philosophical commitments, the smallest portion of religious nones (3% of the U.S. population) believes that the superempirical is simply untrue (Pew Forum 2012). Those in this subgroup are known in the U.S. as atheists. This name is a slight misnomer in that it etymologically signifies that the individual denies only theism, the belief in a god or gods. However, in the U.S., the term "atheist" is generally taken to indicate a philosophical naturalist, one who disbelieves all superempirical phenomena (Simpson: 27-28). Atheists, comprising the smallest classification within religious nones, have certainly gained the attention of the mainstream in a way that unchurched believers and agnostics have not (e.g., the "New Atheist" movement).

Attention to atheism may be due to the near ubiquity of theism in the American context, even among nones (J. Smith: 216). Because theism is the statistical norm within the social context of the U.S., claiming an atheist identity "is best understood not as . . . the product of filling particular socially defined and culturally accepted roles, but as one rooted in personal meaning, history, and biography" (J. Smith: 217). In other words, an atheistic identity is unlikely to result from associations with familial or cultural traditions. It is, therefore, distinct from the "sacred quilt," displays of which include familial and cultural associations. Very often, those who become atheists were raised in a religious tradition (J. Smith: 219-20), but have since rejected any religious beliefs.

Many who identify as atheists have taken on this identity as a result of being exposed to other atheists or non-religious ideas. Many cite exposure to the non-religious, such as the recently popular "new atheist" tomes, atheistic friends or teachers, or classic atheistic texts read during college years, as an important aspect in embracing atheism (J. Smith: 222). The shift to atheism often occurs during the later formative years or early adulthood, and many atheists experience a "slow progression" from theism to atheism during early years of domestic independence (J. Smith: 223). Though contact with the non-religious can be a cause for adopting an atheistic viewpoint, careful consideration of religious doctrines and stories can also spur one to become an atheist (Simpson: 33). This potential distaste for beliefs associated with mainstream religion may illuminate why atheists are typically more hostile toward religion and religious organizations than are unchurched believers or agnostics (Cheyne and Britton: 1). In order to visualize atheists' potentially distrustful or antagonistic orientation toward religion, we propose the metaphor "sacred rain boots."

A popular idiom claims, "Calling atheism a religion is like calling baldness a hair color." Since it would be unhelpful and unfair to depict atheism as a religious disposition, we frame it instead as a disposition toward religion. In doing this, we abandon the word picture of a covering and suggest the image of sacred rain boots. Sacred rain boots are defined primarily by the function they serve; namely, navigating muddy or messy terrain. In the case of atheism, the mess is thought to be the result of religion. More specifically, the mess of religion in modern society is due to religious (and in atheists' view, *false*) beliefs. While there are numerous examples of atheists dealing more gently with religion and religious practitioners (De Botton; Stedman), these gentler approaches demonstrate a strategy of navigating a messy world full of people who, in the view of atheists, hold mistaken and potentially harmful beliefs.

Sacred rain boots, within the confines of our metaphor, are individualized. They are crafted out of the atheist's personal history and, usually, out of their interactions with religious people and ideas in their social context. They are not used for the purpose of displaying the individual's connection to tradition or culture. Atheism, as sacred rain boots, can help the individual navigate the religious, social, and cultural terrain of the U.S., composed largely of people and institutions influenced to some extent by superempirical religious doctrines. Atheists, who explicitly reject such doctrines, are often vehemently opposed to the injection of religious assumptions or perspectives into public policy and governmental proceedings (Baker and Smith 2009a: 731).

While we recognize that atheism is not a religious belief or disposition, we utilize the term "sacred" in discussing atheism as sacred rain boots for two reasons. The first reason is the parsimony of the suggested metaphors. Secondly, atheists, being philosophical naturalists, often believe in the ability of the natural sciences and empirical evidence to reveal truths about the world. The story of the universe, life, and human civilization revealed by evidence based scientific inquiry supply atheists with responses to religious apologetics and, beyond that, to rationalize human existence. The scientific picture of the world provides a conceptual context within which everything from natural phenomena to human suffering to religious traditions may fit. The belief in the ability of empirical scientific observations to reveal truths and the ability of those truths to help atheists understand their own place in the world make the term "sacred" appropriate for this particular metaphor. Atheists' sacred rain boots are individually constructed to help them navigate the muddy mess made by religions in human society. Some nones accept some or all parts of religious traditions, but atheists explicitly deny superempirical beliefs and opt to make their own way through a social world that holds in high esteem notions atheists perceive as false or harmful.

Conclusion

As religious nones continue to proliferate in the American context, it can be pedagogically challenging to integrate the categories of unaffiliated believer, agnostic, and atheist into previous paradigms of sociological studies as well as classroom discussions. For instance, lectures covering traditional religious beliefs and rites may not pertain to religious nones. In so many ways, this group breaks the pedagogical molds that have been utilized by religious studies professors.

Thus, we have proposed a new pedagogical paradigm for religious studies through what we refer to as sacred metaphors. We have briefly introduced three possible metaphors to discuss the function and structures of religion for those broadly categorized as religious nones. We reiterate that no metaphor is completely comprehensive in nature, and those we suggest inevitably fail to encapsulate all characteristics of the described unaffiliated believers, agnostics, and atheists. Regardless of whether our metaphors are effective, the fact remains that the sacred metaphor mechanism for describing the functionality and modes of religion may prove useful in developing innovative and creative pedagogical techniques in the field of religious studies.

Other metaphors could be introduced as they pertain to other traditional religions (e.g., Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam), and might include more natural based sacred metaphors. In fact, many Asian religions and philosophies already utilize natural sacred metaphors to discuss the function of religion and religious practices. As religion continues to change in the United States, we might consider whether the heavy lifting that was once done by religion (keeping the figurative rain out), is now done by various other coverings like sports, entertainment, and social media. There seems to be no homogeneous approach to dealing with these difficulties, but rather a web of particular social identities that provide customized, individual, and consumeristic coverings for each individual (type of music, movies, online fan communities of entertainment, etc.). Was Durkheim correct in his analysis that religion would transform such that it would hardly be recognizable as "religion"?

Teaching religion in the United States can often be a challenging task, and religion can be a contentious subject in public universities. In our particular context of teaching religion in the American South, some students take on the role of modern day apologists and enter the religion classroom defensively. Other students feel the need to attack the validity of any and all religious systems. In many similar ways, these students are also defenders of a way-of-being usually based on science or secularism. We instructors need to keep in mind that students are representative of how quarrelsome and polarizing the topic of religion can be in American society.

We have offered in nascent form a discussion regarding pedagogical tools that have the potential to cultivate discussion in a neutral, yet deliberate, manner. By introducing additional metaphors, students can potentially understand the social, teleological, and ontological functions and structures of religion in a manner less intrusive to and more relevant to their personal beliefs or nonbeliefs. We propose that students could be invited to create their own sacred metaphors of or related to religion as a classroom assignment. This exercise would develop students' creative and analytical skills as they process course content.

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