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RESEARCH IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS, CONFLICTS AND CHANGE

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HUMOR, COLLECTIVE IDENTITY, AND FRAMING IN THE NEW ATHEIST MOVEMENT

Katja M. Guenther, Natasha Radojcic and Kerry Mulligan

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we demonstrate the linkages between humor and political and cultural opportunities and present an analysis of the importance of humor for collective identity and framing in the New Atheist Movement, a social movement focused on reducing the social stigma of atheism and enforcing the separation of church and state. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of interview, ethnographic, and web-based data, we show why the New Atheist Movement is able to use humor effectively in the political and cultural environment. We further demonstrate that humor is central to the development and maintenance of collective identity and to the framing strategies used by the New Atheist Movement. Through a diverse range of forms, including jokes, mockery, and satire, humor is a form of resistance and also can be harnessed to support the goals of social movements. We use this case study as a basic for advocating for greater attention to humor within

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social movement studies, and greater attention to social movements in humor studies.

Keywords: Humor; social movements; New Atheist Movement; collective identity; framing

INTRODUCTION

The growing literature on emotions in social movements has drawn scholarly attention to how social movements access and amplify specific emotion states to mobilize constituents and garner public support (Goodwin, Jasper, & Polletta, 2000, 2001; Melucci, 1995). When addressing specific emotion states, this scholarship has tended to focus on anger as a mobilizing emotion. Yet more lighthearted feelings and sentiments also play an important role in social movements.

In this paper, we promote increased attention to the use and role of humor in social movements. With the rise of humor studies in other disciplines, including a journal and professional association dedicated to the field of humor studies, it is puzzling that humor remains at the sidelines of most sociological research in general and of sociological research on social movements in particular. Sociologists have a great deal to offer the field of humor studies, as the nascent sociological literature on humor shows, and we believe that humor as a site for analysis also has a great deal to offer sociology, including the sociology of social movements (see also Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). We use the case of the New Atheist Movement to demonstrate how humor is utilized in a specific social movement. Our goal is less to analyze humor in the New Atheist Movement and more to show how deeply embedded humor can be in social movements and what attention to humor can yield analytically. We hope this paper will move social scientists focused on social movements to consider humor as a more central component of their analyses.

Drawing on data from three years of fieldwork within the New Atheist Movement, we show how this particular movement uses humor to mobilize participants. This case study evidences how humor is especially involved in collective identity formation and maintenance and framing work, as well as how humor is shaped by political and cultural opportunities. Attention to humor thus enhances multiple areas of inquiry within the study of social movements. The paper makes an important contribution to scholarship on social movements by mapping a line of inquiry that considers the

importance of humor for social movements and that seeks to understand when and why humor is possible and/or effective. A secondary contribution is our focus on a large and rapidly growing mobilization by a segment of the population – atheists and other religious non-believers – that has been significantly understudied in social science.

We begin by briefly introducing the field of humor studies and reviewing extant analyses of humor in social movements. After a discussion of our case and the methods used to examine it, we detail how opportunities for the deployment of humor by social movements are shaped by political and cultural context. We then show how humor is involved in some of the core areas of theoretical interest to scholars of social movements, namely collective identity formation and maintenance and framing. We conclude with suggestions for future directions in analyzing humor in social movements.

HUMOR IN SOCIOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Humor takes on many forms and serves many functions in social life. Satire, mockery, jokes, and puns/wordplay are common forms of humor in contemporary US culture. Although some humor is mean-spirited, humor is often intended to make people laugh and to help them relax and feel lighthearted, as well as to feel better about themselves. Humor serves important social functions, although the study of humor has primarily remained with linguists, social psychologists, and anthropologists and less with sociologists. The role of humor in social life has been a subject of theorizing for centuries; Plato and Aristotle were among the first known to have examined humor through a philosophical lens. The study of humor considers both the stimuli and the response, and theories of humor have been grouped into numerous categories (Keith-Spiegel, 1972). One widespread system of categorization identifies three schools of theory of humor that focus on specific aspects of humor: (1) superiority theory, which emphasizes how humor involves feelings of superiority over other individuals or groups; (2) relief humor, which focuses on humor as a mechanism for relieving social and individual tension; and (3) incongruity theory, which conceptualizes humor as a response to a perceived incongruity (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014; Meyer, 2000). Humor involving superiority, relief, and incongruity all emerge in social movements.

Humor serves numerous functions in social life. Perhaps most obviously, humor is a powerful tool for lifting people's spirits in the face of adversity,

including social movement opposition. Humor can simultaneously entertain and comment about the hardships of daily life (Berger, 1997), while also providing emotional relief. Humor helps solidify social relations as it increases social solidarity and contributes to the maintenance of group cohesion and group boundaries (Cundall, 2012; Fominaya, 2007; Gouin, 2004; Wise, 2007). Marginalized groups utilize humor to manage stigma and challenge authority (Black, 2012), and members of groups with conflicting interests or significantly different social statuses, such as inmates and guards, use humor to manage tension (Franzén & Aronsson, 2013; Nielsen, 2011). Humor is also a well-documented form of resistance (Basu, 2007; Davies, 2007; Haugerud, 2013; Lundberg, 2007; Wise, 2007). For example, subordinates in workplace and educational settings use humor to resist efforts by their superiors at controlling their behavior and productivity (Barnes, 2012; Huong, 2007; Korczynski, 2011).

In the context of social movements, humor is a common tool to enhance mobilization. The small empirical literature on humor in social movements tends to emphasize the unifying functions of humor. Social movement actors may use humor as an "ice breaker" to help participants get to know one another and build trust (Gouin, 2004). Humor can also help reduce feelings of distrust and/or frustration when social movements struggle with internal divisions or external challenges. For example, in her analysis of an anti-capitalist social movement organization, Fominaya (2007) finds that the organization uses humor to overcome internal divisions. Humor helped attract and retain members. Humor offset the serious nature of the organization's political work, as members laughed together at situations that would otherwise be considered depressing. Members also told funny stories of failed attempts at civil disobedience, which helped them make light of failures and created identification with movement actors. Humorous incidents become embedded and historicized, part of group lore and collective memory that reinforces solidary (Fine & de Soucey, 2005).

Humor can also support efforts by leaders or other social movement actors to appear relatable to supporters. In his analysis of the Zapatista movement, Olesen (2007) finds that the Zapatistas built global support in part through their use of humor. The Zapatistas, based in rural Mexico, sought to connect with educated urbanites in Europe and North America, and humor proved to be an especially effective tool for doing so. Being funny made them human and relatable, even to people living in other countries or under very different life circumstances. Similarly, Sorensen (2008) found that the Serbian Otpor movement used humor to attract new members. Their use of humor encouraged a view of the

movement as unique, "cool," and in sharp contrast to the rigid and repressive regime it opposed.

Beyond mobilizing functions, humor can be used strategically and tactically. First and Second Wave feminists used humor to challenge sexism and defy stereotypes of feminists as humorless. Feminists have also employed humor to establish that their intellectual acumen is equal to that of men (Cowman, 2007). Thus, feminists' tactical use of humor met strategic goals of challenging sexism and sexist ideologies. Activists involved in the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) also used humor tactically and strategically. Through joyful and humorous protests, ACT UP activists contested conservative claims that sexual freedom would lead to social decline and provided alternative images of what a more just and joyful society may look like (Shepard, 2005).

Political satire – a common form of humor utilized by social movements and other political and social actors because of its inherently critical slant – often serves to ridicule specific targets, thereby undermining their legitimacy and shifting their standing from object of public reverence to object of public ridicule (Anderson & Kincaid, 2013; Cohen, 2007; Haugerud, 2013; Lundberg, 2007; Paletz, 1990; Shepard, 2005; Sorensen, 2008; Teune, 2007). Satire focuses on exposing contradictions and challenging powerholders; it is not typically proscriptive of solutions to social, political, or economic problems. However, while not always proscriptive, satire can usefully help establish the existence of contradictions or other problems, identify particular targets, and may increase the public's interest in an issue as well as their willingness to support future resistance (Sorensen, 2008). Satire and other forms of humor are often ritualized in society, and thus may be politically permissible even when other forms of critical dissent are not. Guenther (2010), for example, recounts how East German *kabarett* performers satirized the socialist leadership, receiving rave reviews from the leaders themselves. Thus, beyond serving organizational and mobilizing purposes, humor can help advance movement goals.

Although the extant literature on humor in other social contexts suggests that the inclusion of humor into social movement studies would be worthwhile, there has been little effort to do so. This paper reiterates, updates, and expands a largely unheeded call to social movement scholars made 30 years ago (Hiller, 1983) to incorporate humor. Our goal is to stimulate deeper engagement with humor among scholars of social movements so that the uses and effects of humor can be better understood. To help achieve this goal, we present an analysis of humor within one contemporary social movement, the New Atheist Movement.

CASE BACKGROUND AND METHODS

The present analysis draws on data from an ethnographically oriented research project of the New Atheist Movement. Since the early 2000s, the New Atheist Movement has sought to activate atheism as a collective identity and basis for mobilization. Although many atheists are not involved in atheist activism, and even many who do not identify with the label "New Atheist," New Atheism dominates atheist organizing in the US. New Atheism is a big tent identity open to atheists and other religious non-believers – including agnostics, freethinkers, and humanists – who want to promote the separation of church and state and to reduce the stigma of being irreligious in the United States. Many of the New Atheists have responded to the call of public intellectuals such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, who have collectively authored more than a dozen bestselling books decrying religion and promoting the atheist belief system (e.g., Dawkins, 2006, 2010; Dennett, 2007; Harris, 2004, 2008, 2010; Hitchens, 2007a, 2007b; Stenger, 2007). The internet, including dozens of forums, blogs, chat rooms, and sites where visitors can read essays on atheism or view podcasts of atheist lectures and debates, appears to be important in the formation of these groups. Websites like Meetup.com have facilitated the emergence of face-to-face groups of atheists (Cimino & Smith, 2014). In addition to the growth of informal grassroots groups, formal atheist organizations have grown significantly and atheist organizing has become more politicized. Existing organizations have witnessed significant growth in membership. The Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), for example, nearly tripled its membership between 2005 and 2011, while American Atheists almost doubled theirs in the 18 months after appointing David Silverman, an outspoken, publicity-seeking, and self-described "trouble-making" atheist as its Executive Director in 2010. While membership in these organizations is still small – FFRF and American Atheists combined barely have 20,000 members – their rapid growth points to increased interest in atheist organizing. A number of these major organizations also co-sponsored the Reason Rally, a secular political rally in March of 2012 in Washington, DC, in support of reducing stigma against religious non-believers and advocating the separation of church and state. The event was reported as the largest political rally of atheists and other non-believers in US history.

Thus, while historically atheists and other religious doubters were largely invisible and unorganized in the US, and secular activism either occurred behind closed political doors or under the rubric of other issues

(Jacoby, 2004), non-believers have been making more public statements in defense of their religious faithlessness since 2000. Secularism of course has a long and well-documented history in the United States (Baruma, 2010; Jacoby, 2004), but, as Cimino and Smith (2014) detail, the New Atheism represents a break from secular politics with its emphasis on coming out as atheist, generating atheist pride, and promoting activism by atheists to achieve diverse goals. Although the movement disavows proselytizing, it seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific reasoning, and routinely challenges the tenets of religious faith. The movement is comprised of at least a dozen national-level organizations that differ in many ways, including size, scope, strategy, and ideology, but which are bound by a shared commitment to making atheism an accepted identity and practice in the United States and to ensuring the separation of church and state (Cimino & Smith, 2014).

The research strategy for the broader research project from which this paper draws has two prongs, one of which focuses on local-level atheist organizing in southern California, a hotbed of atheist organizing, and a second which focuses on national-level organizing across the United States. The lead author, with some assistance from graduate and undergraduate assistants, attended organizing meetings, social events, conferences, and rallies organized at the local and national levels between 2010 and 2012. Field notes from these events are an important data source.

Another key source of data are 51 in-depth interviews, 26 with participants who are primarily (albeit not exclusively) involved in local-level atheist organizing in southern California, and 25 with participants involved in atheist organizing in other parts of the United States and/or nationally. Respondents include the directors of the largest and most visible atheist organizations in the United States (e.g., American Atheists, FFRF, Atheists Alliance, Secular Student Alliance), as well as staff members and volunteers within national and local-level organizations. Interviews lasted 60–120 minutes and reviewed both the personal history of the interview subject's relationship to atheism and atheist organizing, as well as their understanding of the goals, accomplishments, and deficits of the organization(s) with which they are involved. Because one goal of the larger research project from which this paper is drawn is to examine issues of diversity in social movements, women and people of color, who are underrepresented among movement leaders and participants, are overrepresented in our sample. Women and people of color together represent over half of the sample, whereas we estimate that together they constitute less than a quarter of participants in the New Atheist Movement.

The educational distribution of our sample reflects the movement's demographics more accurately. Almost all participants held college degrees, and more than a third held a degree beyond the Bachelor's degree. The overwhelming majority of respondents live in major metropolitan areas (albeit often in suburbs rather than urban cores), and a handful live in smaller towns. None resided in rural areas at the time of the interview.

During the course of the interviews, respondents discussed how they came to identify as an atheist or other religious non-believer and how they became involved in atheist organizing. They also responded to questions about their political views, their activism, and the atheist organizations with which they are involved, including questions about organizational ideology and strategy. Interviews were transcribed and coded with the assistance of Atlas.ti to identify themes and inconsistencies. Since humor permeated interviews, we consider the full interviews for this paper.

Finally, our analysis draws on written movement documents. These include the 2013 volume of the monthly newsletter of the FFRF, postings on major atheist websites (including discussion boards) in 2012, and materials handed out to participants at atheist events we attended between 2010 and 2012, including complimentary magazines, bumper stickers, flyers, etc.

Our analysis of all the data focused on identifying instances of humor being used and considering the content and type of humor, the apparent purpose or function of the humorous incident, and, when it was possible to evaluate, the effect of the use of the humor on participants. Because we have different types of data, we were able to triangulate data and seek out patterns and inconsistencies. Regarding humor, our data are quite unequivocal: humor is tremendously important in the New Atheist Movement, where it serves a number of purposes we detail in the following sections.

THE CONTEXT OF HUMOR: POLITICAL AND CULTURAL OPPORTUNITIES

For the New Atheist Movement, humor is a culturally available and appropriate tool that helps further its goals of de-stigmatizing atheism, challenging religious beliefs, and upholding the separation of church and state. Although the New Atheist Movement clearly makes extensive use of humor in working toward its goals, humor may not always be a viable tactic for social movements. Social movements may face particular restrictions on the use of humor in specific political and cultural environments (Hart,

2007). In some politically repressive contexts, mocking leaders can be a basis for punishment or threat of punishment. While extant conceptualizations of formal repression do not typically incorporate it, humor, like other forms of expression, can be subject to repression, and considering the acceptability of humor enhances understanding of repression. The ways in which the New Atheist Movement incorporates humor into its movement culture is made possible by the broader culture and its tolerance for questioning authority, challenging religious leaders, and making "off color" jokes. In other times and places, these humor strategies would not be possible for legal and socio-cultural reasons. In repressive contexts, for example, we might expect allegorical satire to be more widespread than directly confrontational humor styles.

Social movement leaders and participants must also have appropriate cultural knowledge to use humor effectively (Kuipers, 2006). When used inappropriately, humor runs the risk of offending targets and/or potential constituents and driving them away. For instance, Basu (2007) describes how the Levellers, a British anti-monarchy social movement in the mid-1600, typically relied on humor in order to garner support. Although the strategy benefitted the movement in some ways, it also provoked a moral backlash in the Puritan-dominated culture, in which laughter and joking were considered both frivolous and ungodly. Thus, humor may not always be strategically wise, nor may all groups be equally viable targets of humor.

A movement may also need to make a degree of cultural progress prior to engaging in combative humor; the New Atheist Movement, for example, has engaged in extensive public relations campaigns focused on how atheists are everyday people, which may have opened doors for more confrontational humor. In the contemporary US, the humor tactics of the New Atheist Movement may be further reinforced by the presence of celebrity humorists who also deride religion, such as Bill Maher and Julia Sweeney. The New Atheist Movement is thus able to draw on – and seek to further expand – a broader culture in which it is socially acceptable to make jokes about religious beliefs, practices, and believers.

In the contemporary United States, jokes about religion are generally widespread and both political and cultural spaces exist in which atheists can make jokes about religion (Kuipers, 2006). Religiously disparaging jokes have a long history in the United States, told by a wide range of social actors. Today, atheists are most able to make jokes about religious groups who are already joked about in the broader culture. Catholics and Mormons, who have long been derided by other Christians, are fair game for atheist mockery, and humor in the New Atheist Movement

overwhelmingly focuses on religious extremists such as the Religious Right, as well as religious leaders. Jews, who have a history of violent persecution, are not a group that atheists ridicule. For atheists, the pedophilia scandal in the Catholic Church, which received a good deal of media attention during our period of fieldwork, opened up opportunities for jokes about Catholics, as it did in the broader culture. A popular atheist bumper sticker slogan makes a play on the adage, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder" by stating that, "Abstinence makes the church grow fondlers." Our research reveals that Islam tends to be treated primarily as a threat and less as a subject of jokes, likely reflecting dominant US cultural beliefs about Islam as frightening and problematic. Buddhism, which is a major world religion, receives almost no attention of any kind, apparently because respondents view it as both irrelevant in the US context and as non-threatening (Guenther, 2014). Who is subject to ridicule thus reflects a set of socio-historical dynamics that establish parameters for acceptable targets of humor.

A political and cultural context in which making jokes at the expense of religious belief is accepted has facilitated the routinization of this humor within the New Atheist Movements. By way of one example, as part of a movement strategy for positioning atheists as good and moral and religious people as morally suspect, the FFRF publishes a monthly newspaper, *Freethought Today*, which features a large spread – typically at least two full pages – under the title, "Black Collar Crime Blotter." The spread itemizes moral transgressions by religious leaders such as priests and pastors, as well as transgressions involving missionaries or that took place in religious buildings or at religious events; most involve police or court actions and the blotter is broken down into sections on Arrested/Charges, Pleaded/Convicted, Sentenced, Civil Lawsuits Filed, Civil Lawsuits Settled, Legal Developments, Allegations, Removed/Resigned, and Other. The blotter details cases of sexual abuse and rape (often involving children), fraud, and drug and alcohol-related crimes, all of which point to the particular immorality of religious leaders. The blotter can be read as quite a sad document as it necessarily reflects a good deal of human pain and suffering, yet it primarily incites chuckles and laughter. This is both because of the outlandishness of the crimes and because the blotter often includes details that seem intended to create mirth, such as quotes in which offenders' justify their actions based on religious grounds atheists will see as ridiculous (i.e., "I assaulted that girl because she had Satan in her"). The blotter thus invites laughter, as well as moral outrage, and effectively positions religious people as deviant and as hypocritical. The blotter is made possible by a

broader culture amenable to questioning religious authorities, and where, in fact, such challenges, like the investigations into sexual abuse by priests in the Catholic Church, are widely seen as promoting the social good.

Political and cultural contexts influence the subject of humor, such as which groups can be targeted in jokes, and also the content and mode of delivery of humor. The New Atheist Movement incorporates humor into a range of socially accepted media, including cabaret-style song, lectures and presentations (including on-line podcasts, which are popular in the movement), newsletters, and websites and discussion boards. In contemporary society, where very little is off limits in terms of joking, humor can involve sex, swear words, and social taboos, and the New Atheist Movements uses each of these in its humor. Movement participants seem to use language generally accepted in the broader culture, as well as in comedy more narrowly, in their jokes; for instance, atheist humor often uses the derogatory word "bitch," which is widely used in US culture, including comedic culture. The use of swear words and sexual innuendo in New Atheist humor further establishes distance between atheists and religious people.

HUMOR FOR COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Humor serves many functions for social movements. A core contribution humor can make is to building and maintaining collective identity, or the cognitive, moral, and emotional connections between individuals and a broader community (Polletta & Jasper, 2001). Humor in the New Atheist Movement is important for collective identity in several ways. *First*, humor creates an opportunity to build collective identity among diverse movement participants. Like most movements, the New Atheist Movement involves people with various orientations, such as agnostics, secular humanists, and atheists, as well as individuals with different political ideologies and social locations. Humor breaks the ice, and relaxes people, which may be especially beneficial for newcomers to the movement, who may still be coming to terms with their atheistic identities. At pre-planned atheist gatherings such as conferences and rallies, we found that humor consistently appeared within the first 10 minutes of events, and often within the first few minutes. As one movement leader told the first author while talking informally at an atheist event, scheduling humorous people as speakers is used to "warm" the audience and "bring folks together" by highlighting their "commonalities." To this end, at atheist conferences we attended, which are a key site

for New Atheist organizing, humorists and comedians comprised at least 1/6th and sometimes as much as 1/4th of presenters; this figure does not include portions of lectures or presentations by non-humorists and non-comedians that may still have humorous or comedic content.

Second, humor helps individual atheists manage the stigma associated with being an atheist, providing them with a shared strategy for coping with stigma and challenging religious belief. One respondent shares a common view in our sample about the employment of humor:

> Honestly, my favorite way of coping with hostility [against atheists] is probably just humor … I try to use humor a lot. Humor helps me personally in that if someone's being particularly mean to me, it helps be able to laugh it off, and not take it so seriously …

Humor thus enables people to protect themselves from hostility when they "laugh off" religious ideas or negative interactions with people who express bias against them. Experiences "laughing off" religion are widely shared at atheist gatherings, such that humor is an individual and collective strategy in coping with stigma.

Third, being funny is an identity the movement can appeal to, and has become a central feature of what it means to be an atheist among atheists who are part of the New Atheist Movement. That is, individual atheists tend to see themselves as having a good sense of humor, place high social value on humor as a personality characteristic among other atheists, and participate in New Atheist events in part because they are fun and funny. Our respondents, and the presentations of self we encountered at atheist events, consistently emphasize that to be an atheist is to be funny. A number of interview respondents cited the shared laughter and the "good sense of humor" of the group when identifying reasons they participated in atheist organizing. Others described humor as an important part of the atheist media (including books, blogs, videos, and music) they enjoyed. Still other participants used good humor as a criterion for admiring a particular movement leader or movement celebrity; among local-level groups, the funny people in the group were similarly subject to admiration. Analyses of micromobilization reveal that social movements mobilize participants by tapping into multiple, often overlapping, existing identity categories that they already hold (Viterna, 2013); the New Atheist Movement appeals to participants with identities as atheists, humorous people, and, interactively, humorous atheists.

Comedy is deeply embedded in the movement, reflecting the centrality of humor to this movement's identity and the identities of its participants. At

atheist conferences and rallies alike, comic elements routinely take center stage, and humorists/comedians are among the most celebrated participants in the movement. The Reason Rally included comedic video presentations by world-renowned satirist Bill Maher and comic Eddie Izzard. Former *Saturday Night Live* star Julia Sweeney is also a regular at large atheist events. Dan Barker, the co-director of the FFRF, is a pianist and singer who always plays music and sings at FFRF events. The overwhelming majority of his songs mock religion and reflect dominant beliefs within the movement. His most recent recorded album, from which he has performed at many atheist events, set previously unpublished lyrics by Yip Harburg, the atheist lyricist of *The Wizard of Oz*, to music, including songs like "Lead Kindly Light":

> Where Bishop Patrick crossed the street
> An "X" now marks the spot.
> The light of God was with him,
> But the traffic light was not.

These lyrics are both funny *and* highlight the atheistic belief in the importance of science and technology (i.e., the traffic light) and the danger of simply "having faith."

Tim Minchin, a comedic singer/songwriter and the writer of the Broadway musical *Matilda*, is a regular headliner at major atheist events, like the Reason Rally, and is a popular recording artist among atheists. Several of his songs comically take on faith, undermining religious belief while simultaneously engaging in comedy. Minchin's song "Thank You God," for example, responds to a news item about a boy named Sam who thanked God for fixing his mother's cataracts after they appeared to vanish when 700 people prayed for her. In the song, in which Minchin sings along to a cheerful piano melody, Minchin humorously and systematically debunks God's involvement in the cataract repair. Through the lyrics of the song, which could not be reprinted here due to permissions issues, Minchin irreverently points out that miracles require praying to specific gods in specific places and sarcastically observes that miracles cannot be better explained by science (in this case, especially surgical advances) or even coincidence. He refers to religious people as experiencing "confirmation bias," "group think," and "mass delusion." Minchin's song thus mocks religious belief while simultaneously challenging the validity of religion. The song iterates beliefs central to movement identity, such as that religious people are deluded and irrational and that benign gods would

help all people, not just select grandmothers with cataracts. The song does this by employing humor, which is a key part of how atheists see themselves and which may also help atheists' critiques of religion seem less threatening. Minchin is consistently rewarded with enthusiastic standing ovations at atheist events that suggest crowd approval for his humorous approach to debunking religion, as well as a group identity as people who recognize and appreciate good humor.

Fourth, humor is central to establishing social movement boundaries. Creating an atheistic identity as funny serves to establish and maintain boundaries between atheists and religious believers.[1] Religious people, in the framework of the New Atheist Movement, are droll and humorless. Atheists, in contrast, know how to have fun. Atheists involved in the movement also connect humor and intelligence, such that being clever and witty is a marker of atheist identity.

Some of our respondents expressed finding humor and pleasure simply in the act of experiencing conflicts with religious believers, which serve to create and reinforce boundaries. In reflecting on his path toward participation in an atheist rock band, one interview respondent identified critiquing religion as inherently humorous. Brandon, a male in his mid-twenties, said:

> ... For some reason, it's just really, really funny to me to be offensive about certain subjects .... Like if I hear someone start talking about religion and if I hear something that really bothers me, I'll say something to them. [I will] be like: "Excuse me, do you realize you are really just uninformed? You know you don't know what you're talking about, right?" I get a laugh out of it. (laughs).

This respondent thus reports finding the act critiquing religion fun and pleasurable, and he finds it humorous to critique religious people. The types of interactions he describes allow atheists to reaffirm their atheist identity while also upholding their view of religious believers as inferior/uninformed.

Ultimately, humor is a major component of collective identity processes in the New Atheist Movement. Movement leaders and participant use humor to welcome new members, reinforce solidarity among existing members, and establish boundaries between movement participants and outsiders, especially religious people and institutions. Being funny and having a sense of humor in this particular movement are even core parts of the primary identity associated with the movement; so prized is humor in the culture of this movement that it would be an insult to accuse another atheist of not having a sense of humor.

HUMOR FOR FRAMING

Frame theory focuses on how shared meanings and ideas influence understandings of issues and events (Benford & Snow, 2000). Social movement frames are often carefully developed self-presentations that social movement actors use to emphasize certain aspects of an issue. Frames provide schema for making sense of issues, and are typically oriented toward promoting a specific form of mobilization.

Humor often manifests in frames. The present analysis suggests that humor is central in depicting opponents in a negative light. *First*, framing strategies represent opponents as ridiculous. By subjecting them to ridicule, atheists undermine attempts by the religious to frame their goals as holy or divine. For instance, a group of religious skeptics who call themselves Pastafarians, or "followers" of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, purportedly believe that life as we know it was created by a highly intelligent creature made of spaghetti noodles who continues to shape the Earth through "His noodly appendage." Although the Church's website claims that it is *not* satire (Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, 2013), the intent is clearly to draw parallels between the ridiculousness of believing in a higher power such as the contemporary understanding of God and the ridiculousness of believing in a higher power such as a pasta-based deity. The flying spaghetti monster is often used as short hand by atheists to reference the ridiculousness of all religious belief. In describing her skepticism toward any non-evidence based beliefs, one respondent said, "The flying spaghetti monster, it's a good joke. It's funny. But it's true. It's exactly as plausible as anything else." This comic tool frames religion as ridiculous and as worthy of ridicule.

At atheist conferences and rallies, speakers routinely also mock specific religious beliefs. At the 2012 Freedom from Religion convention, several speakers jokingly invoked Mitt Romney's Mormon belief in "magic underwear" and "his destiny to have his own planet" (one speaker also much more seriously expressed concern that the American public did not question the suitability of a presidential candidate who held such "unintelligent" beliefs). Being "struck down" is also a repeated joke; at atheists gatherings, when someone either admits to or engages in what they think Evangelical Christians would consider a transgression, such as swearing or being gay, they marvel laughingly that they have not yet been struck down, sometimes making physical motions that mimic how they might try to shield themselves if struck by a divine lightning bolt. Many New Atheist events include presentations from former religious leaders such as ex-ministers. Jerry De

Witt, a former Pentecostal minister cum atheist, usually has the audience yell "Darwin!" at those moments in a sermon when a minister might ask the congregation to yell, "Amen!" This punctuating shout invariably draws laughter from the audience. Shouting back to a minister seems silly to atheists probably in large part because they are neither accustomed to it nor are they accustomed to any call-and-response presentation style.[2] Furthermore, they know that yelling "Darwin!" in place of a religious affirmation is both transgressive and ridiculous, which makes it funny.

Second, framing strategies represent opponents as distant from the mainstream culture. The New Atheist Movement frames opponents – that is, religious people and institutions – as violating core national values. Specifically, atheist humor contributes to framing religious believers as unfair, undemocratic, and irrational because their political and social views are clouded by religion. For example, as a speaker at a 2011 regional freethought conference, Rebecca Watson prompted a great deal of laughter from the audience in her framing of the Alliance Defense Fund, a conservative Christian advocacy organization, as a paranoid and irrational organization that believes SpongeBob Square Pants, a popular children's cartoon character made out of a sponge, was part of the "gay agenda." Watson's invocation of this belief framed religious believers as zealots unable to respond "normally" to a seemingly harmless children's cartoon. Likewise, the New Atheist Movement frames religious believers and the state actors who support their efforts, such as judges who rule in favor of keeping the Ten Commandments posted in public places, as unfair and as violating core US principles like freedom of religion and equal representation. This framing strategy accomplishes several things: (1) it highlights difference between atheists and religious believers; (2) it emphasizes difference between religious believers and mainstream Americans; and (3) it obscures the fact that the majority of religious believers in the United States have weak (if any) ties to religious institutions and/or do not seek to use state policy to maintain their religious beliefs. Humor thus contributes to setting up an "us versus them" dynamic.

Similarly, framing atheists as pro-science and religious believers as anti-science further emphasizes social distance between religious people and atheists, and connects the New Atheist Movement to a host of policy issues, like teaching evolution in schools, reproductive rights, and the role of faith in medicine. Science and reason are central concepts in the New Atheist Movement, and are core framing tools that position religion as *un*scientific and *un*reasonable. Much of this framing work is serious, but humor consistently emerges here, as well. A symbol in the New Atheist

Movement (and among those who support teaching evolution in schools) is an image of the fish, a symbol of Jesus, with feet and sometimes a tool, to suggest evolution. Sometimes the words "Darwin," "Evolution," or "Atheist" are written in the middle of the fish. A more confrontational symbol shows the fish on a barbeque. Additional symbols show dinosaurs eating fish, and slogans state, "My dinosaur ate your Jesus fish." These images are mock religious belief, while also asserting the primacy of science and reason over religious belief.

A deliberately humorous protest likewise functioned to mock religious beliefs and frame religious people and beliefs as irrational and out of touch with mainstream practices and beliefs. Atheist blogger Jennifer McCreight, who was a respondent in this study, used a humorous protest event to counter claims by an Iranian Islamic cleric that women's immodesty causes earthquakes. She recounts:

> When I saw this [claim by the cleric], I'm like, 'That's ridiculous!', and, 'How dare you say that you know women happening to not dress to his standards basically cause earthquakes?' So the way I chose to respond to it was basically I made a blog post and said, 'Hey, on this day, we're gonna test his scientific hypothesis and I'm gonna dress immodestly and show a little cleavage and we'll see if we can cause a boobquake …' It went viral; it was like five hundred thousand people on Facebook said they were participating and [it] got covered by CNN and every other major news network … I think the reason why it went viral is because it was funny. It was because we didn't take him seriously. I could have gotten mad and written this post that was very feministy about how he was treating women, or I could have done a scientific post about how earthquakes actually happen, but it was more, it was more effective to be like, 'Alright, we know this guy is wrong, and let's kind of laugh at him' instead.

Boobquake thus differentiated between two groups: the Islamic cleric and other religious people like him, and purportedly rational people who do not believe natural disasters are a punishment from a higher power – a group presumably much larger than atheists alone, who through this virtual protest became participants in an atheist event. Jennifer's comments further hit on a key point about the use of humor: making fun of someone or something can be more effective than attempting to make more sophisticated arguments (such as feminist or scientific arguments, in this instance). She attributes the viral take-off of and media attention to Boobquake to its humorous content. Simultaneously, Boobquake challenged a religiously based view of the world.

A final framing strategy involves using humor to deny the claims of opponents. Atheists employ humor to flip a dominant cultural belief on its head and assert that atheists are moral, patriotic, and intelligent, while

religious believers are not (see Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006 for a discussion of the othering of atheists in the United States). Popular slogans on t-shirts and signs at atheist events have pithy messages such as, "Good without God," "Freedom Requires Freethinkers," "Patriotic Atheist," and "One Nation Indivisible."

Danny reported in an interview how a group of atheists responded with humor to people hostile to a small street-corner protest they held aimed at attracting new members and combating stigma. Group members held pro-atheist signs on a Sunday morning at a busy street corner. Several people passing by responded with hostility; the atheist protestors in turn reacted with humor. As Danny recalls:

> One of the funniest [reactions] is, I remember one person actually just flipped us off. And then we waved to him and smiled. Then he flipped us off again and looked at us weird (laughing). And then we did it again! And he got confused.

In this narrative, the atheists hold the moral higher ground; while the hostile passer-by (who the atheists present seemed to assume was religious) used a rude gesture for a swear word – an action of which their religion would presumably not approve – the atheists smiled and waved. Their response ultimately befuddled the hostile passer-by and humorously inverted who is "good" and "bad." This story and similarly humorous narratives about moral transgressions by religious people are often retold at atheist gatherings, as they allow members to challenge conventional views of religious believers as more moral than atheists by framing religious believers as hostile and hypocritical and atheists as more sane, calm, and kind.

The use of framing through humor is especially common in cases of protest and counter-protest, as was apparent at the Reason Rally. During the Rally, protestors from the Westboro Baptist Church ringed parts of the event (the gay son of the founder of the right wing Westboro Baptist Church was among Rally speakers, thus attracting Westboro's attention), waving placards that read "God Hates Atheists," "God Hates Fags," and Biblical excerpts. Atheists responded with signs reading, "Religion: Because Thinking Is Hard," "Dodo [with an image of a Dodo bird, a species now extinct], We're Not In Alabama Anymore," "God Hates Facts," "Fine … I Evolved You Didn't," and, grabbing especially a lot of attention, a man dressed as Jesus holding a sign reading, "I have 99 Problems; This Bitch Ain't One" with an arrow on the sign pointing to a religious protestor wrapped in the US flag reading, "God Hates Fags."[3] Through such challenges, participants in the New Atheist Movement jockey for the upper hand in the science versus religion debate, using humor to try to demonstrate that they are clever and smart, and thus superior to – and even more evolved than – religious believers.

The New Atheist Movement uses many frames that do not involve humor, but the pervasiveness of humor in the movement's framing strategies suggests that using humor as part of their frames is strategic. The movement seeks to make a mockery of religious believers and religious institutions by highlighting the absurdity of religious belief and the outrageousness of the actions of some religious believers. Humor for this particular social movement may be especially advantageous because, as one interviewee noted, it offers a less overtly threatening challenge to religion, while simultaneously causing people some discomfort and forcing them to rethink their religious views:

> Gentle mockery is also helpful for the people who are being mean or dismissive, or discriminatory, because it's a kind of a more gentle way that [I can convey], 'Hey, I'm not taking you seriously and what you're saying is bad,' instead of just harshly saying that. I think it kind of is a slower way to wake people, or a more gentle way to wake people up to their behavior.

This respondent, like others, views humor as a less confrontational way to challenge religious believers than other available strategies.

Many of our respondents echo the sentiment that humor does not appear as hostile as a direct critique based on science or focused on politics. The humor of the New Atheist Movement also tends to target the most extreme of religious beliefs – such as those held by members of the Westboro Baptist Church – and thus may serve to highlight for more moderate religious people that they have more in common in terms of their values with atheists than with some religious people. Humor, some respondents noted, also has greater mass appeal than the more intellectually complex debates about science and faith that involve philosophy, psychology, biology, and physics, among other academic fields. Humor is thus accessible to a broader public – including adherents, participants, and audiences – in ways that other elements of the movement's discourses and activities are not. However, although none of our respondents specifically discussed this, our observations suggest that humor is also intended to ruffle feathers, particularly of outspoken opponents, such as the Westboro Baptist Church members who engaged in the counter-protest at the Reason Rally. For movement insiders, humor helps manage stigma, builds collective identity, establishes who belongs in the movement, and frames opponents negatively to promote continued

mobilization; for movement outsiders, humor may well be seen as hostile and threatening.

CONCLUSION

In the past 50 years, scholarship of collective action and social movements swung away from thinking of social movement actors as irrational crowds incapable of thoughtful, deliberate, or organized action. The critique of the irrationality assumption seems to have slowed engagement with emotions – which are often viewed as irrational, although sociologists and psychologists have both convincingly demonstrated otherwise – and perhaps has likewise retarded scholarly interest in humor. Another contributing factor to the relative neglect of humor in social movements may be that scholars of social movements want movements to be taken seriously; attending to the ways in which movements are fun and funny could appear to undermine that project.

Yet humor is important for social movements. Humor is a communication strategy that may be used to speak to constituents, opponents/targets, and audiences. Humor also fulfills important functions internal to a movement, such as making participation manageable or even fun and exciting. At the micro level, extant scholarship has shown that humor reduces tension when conflicts are present; movements and movement organizations with joking cultures thus may be better managers of dissent and diversity than those that limit humor. While being funny alone is unlikely to cause a movement to achieve its goals, the use of humor can have multiple strategic uses, such as undermining resistance to a movement, building collective identity, and framing movement goals and opposition. Humor may also enhance activist involvement, and make it easier for movements to sustain themselves.

Furthermore, studying humor within social movements stands to enhance knowledge about humor, too. Humor studies has long considered political satire and political humor as important forms of humor that have broader social significance; similarly, studying humor within social movements can illuminate the possibilities of humor for challenging power and contributing to social change. Research on humor in social movements presents a particularly rich opportunity to explore the debate within humor studies on the relationship between power and humor (Speier, 1998). As the present case study suggests, humor does not always function to maintain the dominant order, and in fact can be disruptive to it. How, when,

and why this happens requires further investigation. Furthermore, humor studies could integrate perspectives on social movements to illuminate better the deliberate, strategic uses of humor by actors who are outside of the state yet seeking social and/or political change.

As this analysis shows, humor is central to the New Atheist Movement. In the political and cultural context of the contemporary US, in which making jokes about major religions is socially acceptable even for a stigmatized social group like atheists, the New Atheist Movement does not fear repression based on their employment of humor. Making fun of opponents enables the New Atheist Movement to create and maintain collective identity among atheists, emphasizing how atheists and religious believers are different – in part because the first group is allegedly funny while the second is not – while also building a sense of identity and community among atheists as funny people. Because the New Atheist Movement is heavily reliant on scientific discourses that appear to have limited public appeal, humor also offers a more accessible mode of communication among participants and with the public. Humor is delivered through many modes, including on-line, at rallies, conferences, and discussion groups, and through books and other texts.

Studying the "joking culture" (Fine & de Soucey, 2005) of social movements and social movement organizations illuminates their values and norms, and offers additional tools for understanding social movements and their outcomes. Analyzing movement humor helps reveals processes of collective identity and framing, and helps uncover the boundaries of membership and of movement discourse. *How* humor is primarily used – as subversion, a basis for solidarity, etc. – reflects internal humor, or humor that is oriented inside the movement, as well as external humor, or humor that is oriented outside of the movement (Kutz-Flamenbaum, 2014). The presence, absence, and/or degree of humor may be linked to the broader political and cultural context in which a movement operates, as well as to the goals and content of the movement itself.

Although we focus here on only one movement, we anticipate that humor emerges in all movements – albeit in different ways due to differing goals and opportunities. Seeking to understand variation across social movements in if and how humor is deployed would provide a new angle on conceptualizations of opportunity and constraint, and thereby better illuminate the complex relationships between social movements and the societies in which they are embedded. Comparative analyses of humor use across social movement organizations working on the same issues would potentially reveal linkages between humor and organizational outcomes.

Comparative analyses of humor in social movements would also illuminate when and why humor can effectively be used. The prominence of humor in the New Atheist Movement and the Gay Liberation Movement, for example, might suggest that stigmatized identity groups can use humor to appeal to a broader constituency while minimizing how threatening the movements appear.

Our ultimate hope is that the study of humor will be better integrated into the study of social movements because it offers analytic utility in understanding social movements and their relationship to the social world (and an added benefit is that it might lighten the mood!). As demonstrated in the case of the New Atheist Movement, humor can be central to a social movement, informing a movement's collective identity process and framing strategy within contemporary political and cultural constraints. By relegating humor to the sidelines (as was also the case for emotions), social movements scholarship fails to consider a potentially important tool for social movements in their strategic efforts. When, why, how, and to what effect humor is used in social movements warrants further investigation.

NOTES

1. Humor secondarily also occasionally serves to relegate some members of the New Atheist Movement itself -- notably women -- as devalued members, particularly through the use of sexist jokes and language. For a more detailed discussion of gender in the New Atheist Movement, see Guenther 2012.

2. The growth of Sunday Assemblies and other gathering spaces for atheists that mimic churches may result in shifts about whether this practice is perceived as funny.

3. The Westboro Baptist Church is especially high profile because of their protests at US military funerals. They maintain US soldiers are killed because of the expansion of gay rights in the US. The US Supreme Court upheld Westoboro's right to hold these protests in March, 2011. Most likely, the protestor in question at the Reason Rally was a Westboro member. The protestor in question would not speak with us.

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