

“EVERYBODY BUT US”: CONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL IDENTITIES BY  
DEFINING THE SKEPTIC

by  
Pace Tyler Ward

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of  
the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford  
May 2018

Approved by

---

Advisor: Professor Amy McDowell

---

Reader: Professor Kirsten Dellinger

---

Reader: Professor James M. Thomas

© 2018  
Pace Tyler Ward  
ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

ABSTRACT  
“EVERYBODY BUT US”: CONSTRUCTING EVANGELICAL IDENTITIES BY  
DEFINING THE SKEPTIC  
(Under the direction of Amy McDowell)

Pew research shows that 25.4% of American Christians identify as evangelical Protestants, accounting for the highest percentage of Christians in America (20.8% identify as Catholic and 14.7% identify as mainline Protestants). Evangelical Protestantism may be the strongest religious force in the U.S. but defining the movement has proven difficult. Researchers have used a variety of definitions to develop a better understanding of evangelical demographics, geographies, or religious strength. My interests and the goal of this research deals more with the performance of these identities; I wanted to know how members of Welcome Church “do” their Christianity.

This research focused on observations of a “community group,” rather than church services. I wanted to observe members of Welcome church in a less formal setting, where members could interact more freely and more often. I chose a group that focused on Apologetics because I understood that the practice centered around defending the faith through theological and philosophical discourse. This seemed like the optimal setting to try to understand how Christian identities are constructed through interaction using participant observation, and which beliefs determine one’s own Christian identity, as well as others’. However, I found that in this group the practice of Apologetics seems to have shifted from formal defense to a tactical method of naming who and what is *not* Christian. By focusing on interactions and discussions during these community group

meetings, I found that these evangelical Apologists focused less on their own beliefs, and more on who they cast as religious outsiders.

The bulk of my data gathered from participant observation of this Apologetics group shows a dissolution of non-evangelical identities that extends beyond religious Others. This research shows how groups including, but not limited to students, professors, women, and homosexuals have become indistinguishable from religious outsiders. Because each of these groups are identified as *not* evangelical, they have become one and the same. In turn, these evangelical Apologists understand their own Christian identities by identifying who they are *not*: the salient group of non-evangelicals, or *skeptics*.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	1
METHODS.....	5
SKEPTICS.....	13
CONCLUSION.....	37
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	40

## INTRODUCTION

Protestant evangelical Christianity, the most dominant religious force in the United States (PEW Research Center 2018), is difficult to define.<sup>1</sup> Some scholars define American evangelical identities based on their commonly held beliefs. For example, researchers cite beliefs such as spirit baptism, the individual decision to accept Christ (the ‘born again’ experience), and the importance of proselytizing to non-believers as a means of demarcating evangelicals (Balmer 1989). In *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, Christian Smith (1998) bases his own research on “a set of religious self-identifications.” Smith explains and justifies his methodology: “Few ordinary conservative Protestants... can... articulate more than rudimentary definitions of ‘mainline Protestantism’ or ‘evangelicalism’” (1998). What these evangelicals can do, Smith goes on, is “express ideas like, ‘Liberals compromise biblical teachings because they’re so influenced by modern culture’” (Smith 1998). What Smith describes here, as I will show, is a performance of evangelical Christianity that focuses more on identifying the religious outsider, or those groups who are *not* evangelical Christian, rather than members’ own beliefs and religious practice.

Quantitative sociologists have a hard time operationalizing who is and is not evangelical. A recent article by Hackett and Lindsay (2008) criticizes the field: “...the demographic, religious, or political characteristics of adherents are contingent upon the

---

<sup>1</sup> Pew research shows that 25.4% of American Christians identify as evangelical Protestants, compared to the 20.8% who identify as Catholic and the 14.7% who identify as mainline Protestants.

way researchers identify adherents.” They cite the “most common method among social scientists” of defining evangelicalism as relying on denominational affiliation. They mention additional studies, as well, that focus on “respondents’ self-classification,” or “declared beliefs” on historically-important topics to evangelicalism as a religious movement (Hackett and Lindsay 2008). Quantitative researchers develop definitions that are useful for collecting data concerning characteristics such as demographic population, geography, or religiosity. However, these definitions fail to account for how non-evangelicals constitute evangelical Christian identities. This paper extends the definition of evangelicalism by examining evangelical Christians’ practice of constructing their evangelical identities against religious outsiders, or *skeptics*.

This research focuses on a “community group” organized by a small nondenominational Protestant church in Oxford, Mississippi. This group’s focus was on Apologetics, a religious discipline that involves defending Christian doctrine and beliefs through discourse about theological or philosophical elements of Christianity. This discourse is held between Christian Apologists and critics, or what some call “skeptics.” However, as evangelicalism has continued to thrive within the larger context of American Protestant Christianity, the popular practice of evangelical Apologetics seems to be shifting from a formal defense of beliefs to a tactical method of naming who and what is *not* Christian. In a less formal space than a church service, Apologetics group members’ interactions and discussions about groups they have identified as non-Christian illuminate the ways evangelicals construct and achieve evangelical identity against abstract Others. The performance of Christianity in this group, specifically, exemplifies how group

members' individual practice of Apologetics focuses less on their own beliefs, and more on who they cast as religious outsiders.

In this paper, I show how members of the Apologetics community group perform their evangelical identities against various individuals and groups who they view as evangelical outsiders, or *skeptics*. In *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, Christian Smith (1998) describes how this process strengthens evangelicalism as a faith-tradition because it “perceives itself to be...embattled with forces that seem to oppose or threaten it.” Evangelicalism “*thrives* on distinction, engagement, tension, conflict, and threat,” so, to achieve evangelical identity construction, it is necessary to achieve this distinction. Accordingly, growing religious diversity in the U.S. poses a threat to evangelical Christianity, and this threat explains why evangelicals thrive (Smith 1998). One Protestant evangelical Apologetics organization, Stand to Reason (STR), illuminates how various distinct subgroups are interrelated as religious out-groups in their official website's page on mission trips. “Mormons” and “university students” are included in a list of “non-believers” that Apologists are “equipped to engage” (str.org 2016). Similarly, STR teaches its participants how to “defend their faith” by teaching which out-groups to engage as a form of “real-life apologetics” (str.org 2016).

American society's growing religious diversity provides more opportunities for evangelicals to thrive because there are more subgroups from whom evangelicals may distinguish themselves (Smith 1998). Smith's (1998) analysis of evangelical identities discusses how certain boundaries are drawn between “*evangelical* Christian” identities and other denominations not seen as “real” or “genuine”:

Generally, all of the others, including liberal and mainline Protestants, Roman Catholics, Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons, and various participants in what some



evangelicals call “cultural Christianity” are spoken of as Christian only as a broad religious classification (as opposed to Muslims or secularists, for example).

The quote cited earlier from Stand to Reason, however, suggests an even further dissolution of these non-evangelical identities. STR places “cultural Christianity” into the same category as “Muslims or secularists” (Smith 1998). Further, Mormons, and even university students, are included in the list of “non-believers” (str.org 2016). To evangelical Apologists, as I will show, these out-groups – students, Mormons, Muslims, and secularists – are indistinguishable. They are one and the same because they are deemed *not* evangelical.

Additional research has conceptualized evangelical identities within the framework of social identity complexity theory, which describes an “overlapping nature” of Christians’ “multiple in-group identities” (Roccas and Brewer 2002; Whitehead and Perry 2015). In other words, social identity complexity describes how people understand the groups they belong to, and how those groups overlap. In “A More Perfect Union?: Christian Nationalism and Support for Same-Sex Unions,” Whitehead and Perry (2015) describe, for example, “Christian nationalism” as an identity characterized by “the belief that (1) God chose the United States and (2) the United States must follow God’s commands to flourish.” The result of this dissolution of members’ perceived in-groups is described as “a single, highly-exclusive social category” (Whitehead and Perry 2015). My observations of the Apologetics community group affirm this claim about the exclusivity of the in-group, as suggested by the vast number of out-groups that members identified during weekly meetings. These out-groups include, but are not limited to religious Others, women, LGBTQ+ identities, and university professors. Because the performance of individual evangelical identities is achieved by distinction, the single

salient identity that emerges can be located in the defined out-groups, as opposed to the evangelical Apologist in-group.

In this paper, I argue that the ways Apologetics group members identify *skeptics* support the claim that group members focus more on identifying out-group identities, rather than in-group identities. As I will show, this leads to an ambiguous construction of religious outsider identities. This ambiguity results in a fragile construction of members' own individual Christian identities, due to a lack of any symbolic indicators of insider status beyond the act of distinction in itself. In other words, the dissolution of out-groups into a single *skeptic* identity may remove group members' ability to distinguish between distinct out-groups. This, in turn, complicates how group members understand who and what they are not and cannot be.

In the next section, I will describe my research methodology and data on a "community group" of evangelical Christians entitled "Apologetics." In the subsequent chapter, I will outline the various identities that Apologetics group members have identified as *skeptics* over the course of this research study. I will show how the vast number of skeptic identities reflects how these Apologists have dissolved a multitude of out-groups into a single salient identity, as well as claims about American evangelicalism's "embattled and thriving" status (Smith 1998; Whitehead and Perry 2015). Finally, in the conclusion, I will briefly discuss my findings and make suggestions for future research on American evangelicalism.

## METHODS

The bulk of this data is derived from participant observation conducted at a weekly Apologetics “community group” meeting organized by an evangelical nondenominational church in Oxford, Mississippi: Welcome Church. Welcome Church is a nondenominational church that began as a “plant” (a newly established local Christian church) from a local Southern Baptist church in Oxford. The church was established around four years ago, at the end of 2013. Sermons are held at a public middle school, in the auditorium; the school is less than a mile down the street from the church’s main office building wherein different Bible studies and “community groups” regularly meet, including the Apologetics community group.

According to Welcome Church’s website, the “design” of these “community groups” is intended for churchgoers “to connect with other people on a more personal level and do life together.” The statement goes on to describe these groups as “opportunities for you not only to grow relationships with other people, but a chance for you to grow deeper in your faith through discipleship.” Those interested in attending one of the community groups can join via Welcome Church’s website by providing their contact information (along with their marital status, described as “optional”) and choosing which group they would like to attend from a comprehensive list. As they are listed, the only information about each group provided is the group’s leader, which day of the week and time the group regularly meets, and a brief description of the topic that

more closely resembles a title for the group (i.e., “Explicit Gospel” or “Be the Bridge”). Most of the groups’ topics were listed as “TBD.” I chose to study a group whose topic was listed and clear: “Apologetics.” Once I signed up for the Apologetics group online, I was able to explain my research and ask Bob, the group organizer and leader, for permission to observe his group via email. In his response, he granted me permission to do so, expressing excitement to learn more about my research.

This data is occasionally supplemented with references to various print/video resources from well-known Apologists and Apologetics organizations, which Bob, the group leader, used during the local Apologetics meetings at Welcome Church. In his role as group leader, Bob composed lesson plans and outlines to guide discussion during most of the weekly meetings I attended. Aside from leading this local community group, Bob also leads meetings for the local chapter of Ratio Christi, an on-campus “Student Apologetic Alliance” whose stated goal is to re-establish a “strong and reasoned presence of Christian thinking in academia.” Ratio Christi has several active chapters scattered throughout the United States, as well as three active international chapters (one in the United Kingdom, two in southern Africa). Bob meets with students on the campus of a local university every Monday night. He has explained multiple times in the past that these Ratio Christi meetings cover the same topics, at the same time, as the Apologetics community group.

In total, I collected 30 hours of participant observation data from: 14 weekly Apologetics community group meetings (from September 2017 to January 2018), one weekend-long Are You Ready 2 Reason 4 Christ? (AYR) conference (September 2017), three monthly “Monday Men’s Night” men’s ministries (from September to November

2017) events at the church office, and two Sunday morning church services (July 2017). The Apologetics community group I attended was held at 6:30 p.m. on Tuesday nights at the church's main office building in Oxford, Mississippi. These meetings addressed various topics, ranging from the history and methods of scriptural translation, to examinations and criticisms of other religious beliefs and doctrines. I chose to observe the AYR conference and men's "Monday Men's Night" meetings, in addition to weekly Apologetics group meetings, because I was curious if there would be any observable changes in how group members performed their Christianity depending on the social setting and its characteristics, such as scale, demographic, or purpose.

Over the five months I attended the Apologetics study, I observed 13 different community group members, in total. At the first meeting I attended in September of 2017, aside from Bob and myself, there were 6 members present (N = 2 women and N = 4 men). When I stopped attending the weekly meetings in January of 2018, there were four members, aside from Bob and myself, who were attending regularly (N = 2 women and N = 2 men). All of the group members are white. Members' ages range from 30 to 60, aside from one woman who appeared to be in her early twenties and is a student and member of Bob's Ratio Christi group. The group members in attendance varied on a weekly basis, but a general overview of my study reveals a sub-group of five regular attendees. These regular attendees became like 'main characters' in the comprehensive body of data I collected, participating in and contributing to group discussions more frequently than those in attendance less frequently. Two of these regular attendees, Louis and Morgan, are married to one another, and they have one daughter enrolled in college. Bob, the leader of the apologetics community group, as well as the campus

ministry group Ratio Christi, is married and has two children. Sarah, a teacher at a local public middle school, is married to a man and has a son who is enrolled in college. Fred works at a law firm. He was married at the start of the study, and he often provided the group with details concerning the progress of his and his wife's divorce.

Apologetics group meetings lasted anywhere between an hour, to two and a half. Initially, the topic of each week's meeting varied among such subjects as the bibliographic history of biblical scripture and translation, to doctrinal or scriptural inconsistencies commonly cited in skeptical analyses and critiques of Christianity. Beginning in November, however, the group began a unit, spanning over the course of about 3 months, which focused on a publication by Gregory Koukl entitled *Tactics in Defending the Faith*. This unit—during which group members engaged the “workbook” and Koukl's own corresponding video lectures—was published through Stand to Reason (STR), an Apologetics organization founded by Koukl with the mission of training Christians “to think more clearly about their faith” and to make a “gracious defense for classical Christianity and classical Christian values in the public square” (str.org). This organization produces a weekly radio program, podcasts, and other various resources which are available on their website. STR also sponsors mission trips:

[STR] orchestrates interactive trips to Berkeley, CA, and to various parts of Utah where participants are equipped to engage atheists, Mormons, university students, and other non-believers. Students learn to defend their faith, and also grow in knowledge and confidence of their Christian convictions. (str.org)

Koukl, the author of the *Tactics* workbook and featured speaker in the corresponding video lectures, is the founder and president of STR. He is a 67-year-old white man.

Dressed in a blue dress shirt and khaki slacks, Koukl speaks to his studio audience in a light-hearted manner, often making jokes and acting out characters and scenarios

throughout each session. He also describes, during the first session, how he often receives criticisms about his radio show that he can be cold or rude to callers. He responds to these criticisms, clarifying to audience members that his intent is to be “direct,” and that his *Tactics* curriculum is not meant to “demean” others.

In a research project designed to observe how members of an Apologetics community group—organized through a southern nondenominational church—perform and defend their Christianity against outsiders, topics such as sexual politics, education, and religious others commonly emerged in our weekly discussions of evangelicalism and its practice. Most often, the topic of the week’s meeting contributed to, if not entirely catalyzed, more personal conversations about group members’ daily experiences with others outside of the church setting such as coworkers, students, or family members. The open discussion format of the weekly meetings allowed me to examine how group members construct their own understanding of themselves as evangelical Christians. It was during these discussions that I observed how members collectively determine which characteristics and behaviors are *not* and *cannot* be Christian.

Research suggests that a distinction of some sort between ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ is expected when focusing on a “distinct and committed grouping to which all respondents belong” (Hodkinson 2005). I observed varying degrees of my own proximity to members of the Apologetics community group based on the context of a given interaction or situation. However, in response to an inquiry upon my joining the Apologetics group, I established early on that I do, indeed, identify as a Christian. This primary characteristic of my identity had a tendency to outweigh other secondary, elective characteristics, which include but are not limited to: feminism, academia, left-

leaning political views, etc. (Hodkinson 2005). I may not have achieved the same degree of access had I been deemed a religious outsider. If I had identified myself as an atheist, for example, or had elaborated that I practice Christianity in a manner more adherent to Orthodox Christian views, I may have been deemed an outsider. It seems that by simply identifying as a Christian I did not have to work very hard to achieve access. I did occasionally express my particular Christian views, which may or may not have aligned with the implied beliefs of the group members depending on the specific case. While the degree of transparency concerning my identity did not extend fully to *Orthodox Christian*, which could have resulted in group members' perception of what Hodkinson (2005) describes as an "artificial façade," I experienced little opposition to my own degree of access to this group. This trend persisted regardless of whether my expressed views aligned with, or departed from, the group's suggested unifying views in a given interaction. For example, one exercise during the *Tactics* unit asked us to indicate whether we "relish" in encounters with nonbelievers, are "willing, but nervous and uncertain," or if we are simply afraid or try to avoid it. When I described myself as "willing, but nervous and uncertain," I explained that my uncertainty arose from taking care that I understand what is or is not "heresy." I was not the only person who answered this way. However, I expected the reason I provided to garner potentially negative responses due to the suggestion that I do not actively study or that I do not have an extensive knowledge of my own beliefs. Contrary to my expectations, my answer prompted an accepting response from Bob, describing how "important" this is to know. Hodkinson implies that this results from the "inflexible indicators" of my identity—my being a white male commonly perceived as heterosexual based on presentation—which



may have served to reduce skepticism towards my status as an insider. In other words, had my gender presentation, performed sexual orientation, race, age, or class indicated a lower likelihood of inclusion within the group, I likely would have faced more opposition, or at least a higher level of implied skepticism concerning the degree of authenticity of my Christianity according to group members.

On the other hand, I did experience some hesitations, particularly concerning my physical appearance and presentation, which tends to deviate from those commonly expressed by group members. For example, there were some weeks in which, prior to the scheduled group meeting, I would make a point to change my outfit. In these cases, I had previously been wearing clothes which I presumed would result in confrontation from group members (i.e. merchandise from underground music scenes that convey what may be construed as anti-Christian sentiments, or accessories, particularly patches which I sewed myself, which may suggest my participation in a sub-group often understood as poised in opposition to Christianity). While the “symbolic importance” of presentation may not be as primary a characteristic within the Apologetics group as in other subcultural groups, I nevertheless experienced a degree of personal restraint on my presentation for the sake of maintaining and further developing rapport with group members (Hodkinson 2005). This restraint was certainly informed by past experiences in evangelical Christian churches, as well as numerous interactions with evangelical Christian family members that involved negative responses to my subcultural presentation. I have no personal qualms concerning an inconsistency of ideals between my personal aesthetic preferences or tastes and my religious affiliation. My past experiences, however, informed a presumption that, regardless of my own rationalization

of these seemingly conflicting characteristics of my identity, group members could potentially create social barriers distancing me from authentic participation within the Apologetics group.

The measures I took to avoid identification as a religious outsider by group members were not intended to communicate an insider status. Rather, I altered my appearance simply to *avoid* being characterized as a religious *outsider*, or what I will define as *the skeptic*. In the following sections, I will describe which social groups Apologetics members cooperatively define as *skeptics*, and how they do so. My goal is to illuminate how members of this local Apologetics group focus on identifying the *skeptic* when constructing their own identities, which suggests how fragile evangelical Christian identities become when they are almost entirely informed by the simple identification of *who* or *what* group members should not be or do.

## SKEPTICS

Members of the Apologetics community group define evangelicalism in opposition to *skeptics*. In this chapter, I aim to outline how members identify *skeptics* as a social group into which a variety of identities, institutions, and ideas are consolidated as anti-Christian. Skeptics include but are not limited to homosexual identities, professors and universities, feminists and feminism, and numerous religious minorities and denominations. The *skeptic* represents to the group what they, as evangelical Christians, are *not* supposed to do, say, be, or believe. Jews, Mormons, and Muslims, for example, are deemed skeptics by the group, as is a Baptist church in Chicago that plans to appoint a woman to a leading pastoral position. The woman who fulfills this position, like the aforementioned Baptist church, is also considered a skeptic because of her failure to obey Biblical doctrine. According to these Apologists, the Bible dictates that women may not hold positions of leadership in the church. This example illuminates how members decide who or what is a skeptic. The paradox of this example is that this group identifies as Baptist in some cases but defines Baptists as skeptics in others. That same day, one group member remarked, “You know we’re a Baptist group when we get here, open our Bibles, and immediately start talking about food.” This suggests a conflation of the organizational scale of skeptic groups. The Baptist church is identified as a skeptic as a consequence of the group’s perceived feminization of the church in Chicago, but simultaneously constitutes the group’s identity when considered independently from the

context of the Chicago church's move to appoint women as church leaders. It is important to note, however, that this is the only occasion in which any denominational identification was expressed over the course of my study.

The weekly Apologetics community group meetings I attended were commonly centered on *skeptics*. About mid-way through the first semester of our study, Bob introduced us to Gregory Koukl's video lecture series, *Tactics in Defending the Faith*. Bob provided us all with the supplemental study guide by the same name, which is intended to be used alongside the video lecture series. In a Facebook group post visible only to Apologetics group members, Bob informed us, prior to that week's meeting, that we would be beginning this unit. In this post, he asked group members to purchase a three-ring binder and bring it to the meeting for the printed workbook materials. Because Bob provided us with the materials, I encountered an expense of less than five dollars, having purchased a non-descript binder from a convenience store.

In the first segment of the video, Koukl tells a story about his use of tactics on a "pagan." Koukl sets the scene: he and his wife are travelling to a church, at which Koukl is scheduled to speak. The two of them stop in Wisconsin to have some photographs developed. Koukl describes how he noticed a woman, an employee of the store in which they were waiting, who was wearing "a necklace with a five-pointed star...called a pentagram." He goes on, describing the ensuing conversation between himself and who he begins to refer to as the "Wisconsin witch":

**Koukl:** "Does [that necklace] have religious significance for you?"

**Employee:** "Yes. I'm a pagan."

One of the group members, Fred, laughs out loud at the employee's religious affiliation. Koukl, too, makes a point to describe for the live audience how his wife "spontaneously...[burst] out laughing." Bob, the group leader, briefly pauses the DVD and apologizes for interrupting. He tells the group that he "had...to deal with" paganism "by request" the previous night during Ratio Christi, which is the student Apologetics group he leads on a university campus. Before the group could get back to viewing Koukl's video lecture, Fred interjects that his own understanding is that to be "pagan...meant you weren't a Christian." He compares this distinction to "Jews and Gentiles," showing one way that distinct subgroups overlap during discussions of anti-Christian opposition. Rather than explicitly stating specific pagan beliefs that contradict Christian beliefs as a means of outsider identification, Fred's analogy suggests that the group learns to identify pagans as *skeptics*. Because "pagans" are "like Jews," they *cannot* be Christian. In other words, group members learn to identify skeptic identities and/or groups without needing to understand *why* those individuals/groups are not Christians. Instead, skeptics are identified in more ambiguous ways, i.e. comparison with groups whose non-Christian status has been established within the group.

### *Nonbelievers and religious minorities*

Nonbelievers play a critical role in the construction of group members' Apologetic-evangelical identity. Members of this group identify some *skeptics* by means of explicit definition or identification of incorrect beliefs, or beliefs which do not align with those taught by evangelical Christians. The most common examples of the explicit definition of *skeptics* at the individual level can be derived from the data gathered over

the course of the *Tactics in Defending the Faith* unit. One of the most common conceptualizations of the *skeptic* presented in this unit is the “nonbeliever.” While the definition of the nonbeliever presented in the first session of the unit is only implied, it provides the justification required to explicitly define various individual *skeptics* in later meetings. Koukl, as well as the *Tactics* workbook, vaguely conceptualizes the nonbeliever as the oppositional role being fulfilled in an interaction with an Apologist. Koukl remarks, early in the first session, on Christians’ general discomfort with “engaging nonbelievers about their faith.” The very first “Student Interactive Exercise” in the unit asks participants to “Buddy up with another person in class and explain your answer to the following question: When I think about discussing Christianity with non-believers...” This exercise reflects a degree of obligation to engage specific persons about Christianity, and these persons are known as “nonbelievers” according to Koukl. The discussion among group members following the exercise provides an example of how the identity of the “nonbeliever” is interchangeable with the skeptic identity. Bob, while emphasizing to the group the idea that conversion happens “one step at a time,” exemplifies his point: “If there are twenty steps to the process, and the negative tenth step is an...atheist, and ten is a full-fledged Christian who practices evangelizing,” he says, “you have to take it one step at a time.” Bob’s statement demonstrates how the consolidation of distinct identities often goes unchecked during discussions involving the *skeptic*. Regardless of an individual’s beliefs, even in the case that these beliefs align with those of the group members, if they fail to practice “evangelizing,” they still fail to achieve a status of “full-fledged Christian.”

I observed members' identification of religious minorities as *skeptic* identities during meetings from the very start of my research. The first meeting I attended, in September, covered the topic of "How we got the Bible today." While discussing the Great Isaiah Scroll, which contained what would become Isaiah 53 in the Christian Bible, Bob described how "Jewish academics" like to "glaze over" this passage. Bob briefly explains the reason for this being that Isaiah 53 presents information contrary to their belief that the prophet would be a "military leader." A young white man in the group responded with a joke that likened this belief about a militaristic prophet to Islamic "terrorism." He received laughs from most of the group members. This laughter about Islam exemplifies how these Apologists ridicule and mock religious minorities as if they are all the same. As a result, group members could understand distinct religious groups as synonymous and, as a result, dissolve them into a single *skeptic* identity.

One group member, Stephen, attended many of the group meetings for the first half of the first semester of my research. During the second group meeting I attended, Stephen and Bob engaged in a rigorous and nuanced discussion concerning the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and historical debates over the canonicity of these two artifacts. While Bob was describing the council that met to discuss the inclusion of the Apocrypha in the Christian Bible, Stephen asked Bob: "Why does it matter what the Jews thought, because they weren't worshipping the one true God?" Moments later, still on the topic of the Jewish criticisms of the Apocrypha, Stephen interrupted again: "But they were Jews." He justifies his remark, claiming that Jews teach that "Jesus was the son of a Roman soldier and a prostitute." Stephen intertwines the multiple reasons he provides for not considering Jewish criticisms of various non-canonical biblical texts (Stephens assertions

that they do not worship “the one true God” and about Jewish teachings about Jesus’s birth) in a way that additionally suggests a relation to a distinct identity, the prostitute. Furthermore, Stephen cites claims about Judaism that are inconsequential to the validity of their attitudes towards the Apocrypha. Not to mention, Stephen’s definition of Jewish individuals as *skeptics* seems unprompted. Bob indicates reasons for why evangelical Christians do not agree with including the Apocrypha in the Bible, citing that dates of certain historical events are incorrect and its coverage of such topics as the “prayers of the dead” and the “pre-existence of the soul.” Considering this context, Stephen seems to make claims about Judaism for no apparent reason, which could influence other group members to understand Jewish beliefs as necessarily incorrect, regardless of whether or not the belief itself opposes their own.

Another example of the overlapping religious outsider identities occurred the following week, during a meeting mostly focused on prophecy and prophecy-fulfillment in the Bible. Fred provides his interpretation of a passage from the book of Galatians: that it “condemns the reception of any other prophecy.” Bob’s response provides an illuminating example of how distinct subgroups, in this case specifically of religious subgroups, become conflated into the single, salient identity of the *skeptic*. Bob suggests that if Joseph Smith had understood this verse, according to Fred’s interpretation, it would not have mattered whether or not he truly received a prophecy, he would have known better than to believe it. He describes the result of Smith’s failure to do so as Mormons’ belief that, in the afterlife, you “become a god” in possession of your own “planets and stars” rather than spending eternity in the Christian idea of heaven. Bob goes on: “Mormonism was doing this way before L. Ron Hubbard even came up with



Scientology.” This allows the possibility for group members with little to no previous exposure to Mormonism or Scientology to understand them as synonymous. Fred mentions Islam following Bob’s remark about Scientology, to which Bob replies that Muhammad’s belief that “the angel” he had received his prophetic vision from was “a devil” is “one of the few things he was right about.” Fred relates Islam to the two religious groups that members had previously mentioned, allowing for other members’ dissolution of another group into the *skeptic* category by focusing on a single similarity gleaned from claims made about separate groups.

One meeting about a month later, Fred presented a concept to the rest of the group that provides an explicit example of how oppositional religious groups are consolidated into their own aggregate, which he calls “religions of Cain.” Fred told us about the idea after viewing the documentary “DNA v. The Book of Mormon.” He begins telling us about a debate in which “a great Apologist” explained that there are “only two religions...the religion of Cain and the religion of Abel.” The Apologist, as Fred describes this concept, seems to polarize the entire spectrum of religious beliefs. He explains that the idea behind this concept is that, in a story in the Christian Bible, Abel worshipped God with a blood sacrifice as he was asked, whereas Cain went against God’s wishes by attempting to worship with vegetables. Fred then applies the concept: “Islam is a religion of Cain...Roman Catholicism is a religion of Cain...Mormonism is a religion of Cain.” Fred also explains this concept just over a month later in a separate community group, a men’s Bible study entitled “Monday Men’s Night.” He describes how Cain attempted to worship God by “[doing] it his own way.” He lists “Islam” and “Catholicism,” again, as examples of “religions of Cain,” but he explains the distinction

further. He describes “religions of Cain” as “everybody but us...Even cults...Mormons, Jehovah’s Witnesses...it’s all works-based...we have to do it *His* way.” He explains his reasoning, that these groups try to “bring God to them.” Fred has explicitly stated an idea conceptualized by who he claims is “a great Apologist,” suggesting a degree of the Apologist’s authority. This authority, in turn, influences how group members understand what they should not do by relegating all religious groups, outside of themselves, to a category characterized as groups who do not worship according to God’s wishes, or the ways in which evangelical Christians do.

### *Homosexuals and Women*

Religious minorities are only one category of groups that are dissolved into the salient skeptic identity. This Apologetics group identifies ‘homosexuals’ and ‘women’ as *skeptics* perhaps more commonly than any other *skeptic* subgroup. As early as mid-September, the topic of homosexuality had surfaced during one of the weekly Bible studies. One group member, a high school teacher named Sarah, was one of the first to broach the topic. She appealed to the group for guidance concerning two coworkers with whom she eats lunch regularly. She does not explicitly ask the group for suggestions about her coworkers, nor does she explicitly express the nature of her concerns in the first place. Instead, she vaguely contextualizes her unease: her two friends attend “some liberal church,” and Sarah calls the root of her concern “the homosexuality question.” I had never heard of “the homosexuality question” before, and while I was able to infer the essence of the question, Sarah never explicitly *asked* “the homosexual question.” However, Bob evidently is familiar with the term, and responds: “I kind of thought that’s

what you meant.” Sarah avoided any clear statement of the “homosexual question,” thus withholding that information from group members, including myself, who may or may not be familiar with it. Furthermore, Bob confirms that he understands the question. Sarah and Bob could have different understandings of the homosexual question, and Bob’s advice is in accordance to what he assumes Sarah believes. Thus, an understanding of the homosexual and the “homosexual question” remains vague and retains the potential to vary even among members of this Apologetics group. The only thing necessarily agreed upon, by virtue of the nature in which the topic of homosexuality has been addressed during this meeting, is that there is indeed a question of homosexuality to be confronted by Christians.

Later, in December, Sarah initiates a discussion concerning a homosexual high school student that illuminates how group members have addressed and discussed homosexual individuals in a way that dissolves them into the general skeptic anti-Christian category. Following a conversation surrounding general attitudes towards public schooling, Sarah tells us about a “tenth grader...from Seattle,” who recently expressed his excitement about the upcoming holiday break because he gets to visit his long-distance partner, “a boy.” “In your soul...” Sarah explains, “you wanna be happy for them.” Notice Sarah’s avoidance of an explicit identification of this student as gay. Instead, she attempts to suggest the student’s sexual orientation at the beginning of her anecdote by including details entirely inconsequential to his sexuality, but rather that concern the student’s background (he is from Seattle). She then resorts to an implicit suggestion of the student’s sexuality by stating the gender of the student’s partner. So, as Sarah’s approach to this discussion suggests, to hail from Seattle, or to be a tenth-

grader, or to have a long-distance partner who is “a boy,” are *skeptic* characteristics. Over the course of this discussion, the focus progressively shifted away from the individual student—perhaps because the work of identifying him as a skeptic is done—to a more general discussion surrounding public education as an institution. Sarah displays a passionate expression of her disapproval of homosexuality’s growing presence in “grade school,”: “When you’re exposing that, you’re exposing sex.” Sarah’s usage of pronouns, like “that,” in place of “homosexuality,” creates ambiguity; apologetics members could just as well understand the “that” of Sarah’s description as residents of Seattle, or individuals in long-distance relationships, which may very well contribute to group members’ dissolution of distinct social groupings into the simplified skeptic category.

In addition to the ‘homosexual,’ apologetics group members frequently define ‘women’ as *skeptics*. One of the earliest topics we covered over the course of this study was a lesson Bob called “How we got the Bible we have today.” As the meeting was nearing its close, a conversation had developed in which group members, primarily Fred and a coworker of his at the law firm identified common standards used for determining the canonicity of biblical translations. A disagreement arises between the two of them, over whether the standard “older is better” is valid. Sarah, having remained quiet during most of this conversation, has a question about this point: “Are there any major doctrine differences?” Bob informs us that denominational divisions are not dependent solely on translation. “We should not worship a translation,” he says, advising us that it is “important” to read “multiple versions.” Bob’s advice prompts Sarah to ask the group if they have seen the newer editions of the New Independent Version (NIV) of the Bible.

She explains that, in this edition, all instances of “brothers” have been revised to include “...and sisters.” After explaining this to us, Sarah throws her hands up in front of her and shakes her head in response, implying her confusion and incredulousness about this revision. Not only does Sarah avoid explicitly stating that she, indeed, disagrees with this revision, but also her non-verbal response is nonetheless popularly understood as disapproval with no provision of a reason the revision is ‘wrong.’ Again, group members can define the skeptic by merely conveying what they should not approve of: here, the equal representation of gender in the Bible.

These Apologists treat feminism and feminists as a unique category of the anti-Christian skeptic. Bob and Fred respond to Sarah’s question about the NIV edition, almost in unison, distinguishing these newer editions as the “feminist version.” This definition creates the potential for group members to develop the understanding that they are not supposed to approve of the aforementioned revision *because* it is the “feminist version.” None of these group members necessarily identified an individual woman, or the individual identity generally, as a skeptic. They did not need to state that explicitly. Instead Sarah, Bob, and Fred condemn the idea of equal representation of women and men in scripture and associate it with the more general framework of ‘feminism.’

One of the community group meetings, late in October, focused on the question: “Is the Bible anti-woman?” After Bob announced the topic, another group member, Louis, who works at a hospital nearby, asks the others if they have heard of the Baptist church “in the news” that is trying to start appointing female pastors. Sarah indicates she has: “They are calling her...a teaching pastor,” she says before elaborating that “they,” who I interpreted at the time to be the female pastor and the male pastor, are “co-pastors.”

Upon hearing this, Bob smiles before asking, “Are the co-pastors married?” Bob’s question confused me. Much like the “homosexuality question,” Bob’s concern about women’s headship in church is never explicitly stated throughout this interaction. Instead, Bob answers himself before the other group members get a chance to, “I bet they aren’t.” Bob’s assumption about the co-pastors suggests that one exception to the rule prohibiting women to fulfill these roles would be a case in which the woman in question is married to the pastor. However, Bob assumes that this is not the case, though he never explicitly states why. This ambiguity creates a potential for group members to infer that i.) for a woman to achieve headship in a church she must be married to the pastor, but ii.) a woman who wants to lead is ungodly. The co-pastors are not doing what they ‘should’ do because they are not married. You can assume they are not married because they are not doing what they ‘should’ do. The circular reason potentially inferred by group members in this interaction results in an understanding that there is no ‘right’ way for women to hold positions of leadership in a church. Women either remain in the subjugated position granted to them in fundamentalist interpretations of the Bible, or they remain subjugated because an attempt at attaining a position of leadership is impossible to achieve without rendering herself a *skeptic* and delegitimizing her Christian identity.

Discussions of feminism and feminists as a *skeptic* identity were prominent over the course of this particular meeting. Early that night, Bob provided group members with his description of the beliefs he associates with “third-wave feminism” as distinct from those of first- and second-wave feminism. Bob tells us that, rather than being in favor of rights “like voting” (a simplified comparison that could suggest to members that the primary characteristic of first- and second-wave feminism is “voting” rights), “third-wave

feminism” supports the belief that “men and women have zero differences.” Bob calls this “craziness,” describing how “society” has become “divorced from reality.” Bob then suggests that this “reality” is defined by the Bible by urging group members to ask ourselves “What does the Bible *say*?” Then he tells us, in his own words, that the Bible defines the role of women as being to “fulfill and complete.” He does not elaborate on what, who, or how the Bible says women are supposed to “fulfill and complete,” thereby implying that it may not be specified in the Bible or that the fact of the difference between the beliefs supported by “third-wave feminists,” and what the Bible says about the nature of “reality” is most important. The lesson that the group may learn from this reasoning is that “feminism” is “craziness” because according to Bob’s summarization of the Bible’s definition of “reality,” which implies gender differences, feminists are “divorced from reality.” Therefore, Christian Apologists should not be feminists and should not support the belief that there are “zero differences” between the genders, or else they may be “divorced from reality” with the rest of “society.”

Considering the definition of feminism that Bob establishes at the beginning of the meeting, further discussion over the course of the same meeting can be understood to define an additional *skeptic* identity: women who have been raped. The group was discussing what Bob had described as “a need...[for] observing gender differences.” Fred had recently finished explaining his belief in a fundamental difference of needs in a relationship: “men...need honor” from a relationship, whereas “women...need love.” Sarah, suggesting her agreeance with Fred about the differences between men and women, suggests her disapproval of “feminists,” (who, according to Bob’s explanation before, support the belief that “men and women have zero differences”) when she asked,

with her hands raised before her and shaking her head as if she were confused, “Do they even read the Bible?” As a response, Bob brings up what he calls the “free the nipple movement,” which could suggest that Bob aligns the movement with “feminism” in general. This suggestion bears with it group members’ potential development of a similar understanding. Bob was never able to elaborate on his point, about what the “free the nipple movement” is, believes, or how it relates to feminism. Instead, Fred interjects his own judgment of his understanding of the “free the nipple movement” in a tone conveying sarcasm: “And then they ask why they’re getting raped.”

Fred’s statement suggests to the rest of the group that he understands the motive of the “free the nipple movement” as a reason, or a justification, for a woman to be raped. Fred’s sarcasm suggests that for a woman to “ask why they’re getting raped” is a question worthy of mockery in the context of this movement. The other Apologists do not have to ask him for an explanation of his claim. Not only is Fred’s implicit justification for rape never explicitly provided, but he also conveys a notion that he indeed understands that *some group* (“they”) *are*, in fact, “getting raped.” This logic implies that Fred’s evangelical Christian worldview allows for the justification of rape and that an example of one of these cases would be if the victim was a part of the “free the nipple movement.” That this group is “getting raped” is the extent of the information explicitly stated. Thus, group members are given the responsibility to interpret three things for themselves: who is “getting raped,” why this group is “getting raped,” and why this group should be mocked (by Christians) for asking why they “keep getting raped.”

Furthermore, Fred’s statement about the “free the nipple movement” can be understood as conflating this movement with feminism more generally and women who



have been raped. These Apologists understand all three of these groups to be anti-Christian skeptics. The discussion develops into various explanations of rape as a consequence of the victim's actions, behavior, or presentation. Louis describes how victims are "asking for it," and Bob responds with a tone, again, of sarcasm, explaining how "they" would be upset with him for saying that. While I imagine that *both* feminists and rape survivors (as well as a multitude of other persons and groups, including myself) would indeed be upset with Louis for saying this, the fact remains that the use of the pronoun "they," in place of more specific language, may work to influence members' understandings of who is a skeptic and thereby contribute to a conflation of feminism/feminists, rape survivors, and women in general as *skeptics*. In other words, Bob's choice to use the word "they" in place of more specific words (i.e., feminists, the "free the nipple movement," rape survivors, women, or merely anyone opposed to victim-blaming) suggests that women who want to control (or have lost control) of their bodies are skeptics and therefore not Christian or opposed to Christianity.

These Apologists provided additional examples of the belief that women who are rape victims are anti-Christian skeptics as this discussion continued. Fred shares a story with the group about his "third year of law school," during which he "worked for the D.A. of this county." He tells us he experienced "beautiful girls" who would "come through," meaning women who were involved in court cases concerning rape. He explains to the group that these women had "made nine *bad* decisions...and a guy made one" (emphasis mine). Fred does not provide explicit examples of what he means by "bad decisions," further illuminating how, in this instance, group members engage with little to no information when naming the skeptic. Fred tells us a story about a woman

who was raped. He was at a “gun store” when two women overheard him telling the clerk about the women who had “come through” in court cases involving rape. “One of them began to tell me how *she* was raped,” he says. His sarcastic tone suggests that he condemns the woman for speaking up for herself. Fred implied that the woman was wrong to share her experience(s) of being raped is offensive. His tone suggested that this woman was, in fact, downright offensive.

Group members defined a variety of additional *skeptic* identities over the course of this conversation. Members suggested such examples of their beliefs and perceptions about the prevalence of sexual assault and rape in American society today, listing cases in which women “drink all this alcohol” at parties, or “get high.” Fred interjects his perspective again: “Being under the influence is a surrender of your sovereignty.” Fred, here, suggests a justification for this claim about women who drink or use drugs recreationally, that women may be raped *because* they “surrender” their “sovereignty,” therefore, Fred seems to suggest, group members should not “surrender” their “sovereignty” (i.e., by being a woman who “drinks...alcohol” or gets “high”). Once more, group members can learn who they are, because the group has suggested identities of who they should not be, *skeptics*.

### *Professors and the University*

While women and homosexuals were the two *skeptic* groups discussed most frequently in my observations, group members’ discussions of other discontents have suggested definitions of additional *skeptic* identities. One of my earliest experiences of

the apologetics community group exemplifies how professors and the university as an institution, in general, are identified as *skeptics*. The first apologetics group meeting I attended for my research took place in early September. Before the meeting began, a married couple who appeared to be in their 40s or 50s, Jason and Debbie, took their seats on either side of me and the three of us engaged in casual conversation. The two of them asked me questions about my background, such as whether or not I am originally from Oxford. When asked if I attend the University, I confirmed, elaborating that I am a senior English major, and that my Sociology minor has influenced me to pursue my MA in sociology. Debbie asked about my plans after graduate school, and I told her my goal is to continue writing and doing research while teaching at a university. Neither her, nor her husband, indicated any discontents with me for being a student nor my goals of becoming a professor.

Discussions later that night, however, suggested that these Apologists understand professors and the university to be oppositional, or anti-Christian. The topic of the night's meeting was "How we got the Bible we have today," as Bob explained at the beginning. When the meeting was concluded for the night, Bob invites me to attend the Ratio Christi group that he leads on campus. I told him I would do my best to attend a few meetings, when one of the group members gets Bob's attention. Morgan, who attended most of the group meetings with her husband Louis, asks Bob if he has any more "stories," this week. Last week, Bob explains, he told the group about a "woman...in the Gender Studies department" at the University who had been teaching that "Jesus" was "married...to a man." Following groans from multiple group members at Bob's story, Debbie mentions another professor, this time by name, who teaches a

class that “compares” the Bible and the Quran, remarking that the Bible is not “required” for the course. A couple of group members began joking and laughing at the notion of sitting in during one of the class periods. Beth suggests that she has also heard about this course when she elaborates further, explaining to the group that the professor is also holding meetings outside of the classroom, at various places “around town,” for those who are not students to attend. More joking and laughing from the group follows, these being about attending the public meetings.

This discussion began with Bob’s story about a “Gender Studies” professor or, rather, “woman” teaching her students that Jesus was in a same-sex marriage, thereby influencing how group members may understand the focus of the discipline by describing it in relation to the distinct *skeptic* group of homosexual individuals previously mentioned. The discussion then broadens when Debbie mentions a professor without mentioning his or her department. She points out that the class compares the Bible and the Quran, and that the Bible is not a required text, which suggests in the context of the conversation that these two details are points of discontent. The group then reacts to Debbie’s information by joking about attending, conveying what could be the group’s view of the illegitimacy of the class, or the professor’s ability. After this discussion, as most group members are making their way out, I introduce myself for the first time to Louis, Morgan’s husband. He asks me about school, and I tell him as I told Debbie, that I study English and Sociology. I observed that Louis seemed disinterested; he ended the conversation somewhat abruptly and told me it was nice to meet me while making his way to the door. I could not help but feel as if I had offended Louis when I revealed that I was a college student, or that he felt as if I opposed his Christian beliefs.

The following week's meeting provides another example of how group members identify professors and universities as *skeptics*. Bob explained to the group that the topic of the night was the Apocrypha and the New Testament, which, he remarks, will help group members with explaining that "Jesus *was* a real human being, and not just a myth created centuries after." Bob moves from this point to mentioning a "little problem" encountered during that week's Ratio Christi meeting. He tells us that two of the students "had been taught" that Judaism was originally a "polytheistic religion," and that the various names used for God (i.e., Yahweh) in the Old Testament represent distinctly separate entities. This is "only a theory," he reminds the group: "Words did develop over time...but, we don't see changes in meaning." Bob defines the "little problem" as what students "had been taught." He implies that, regardless of the content of the lesson a professor teaches, it is a problem when students are exposed to ideas that could be construed as oppositional to or different from evangelical Christian beliefs. Professors are portrayed as the force behind the "little problem" Bob describes.

Around a month later, I observed an example of a group member's definition of professors as *skeptics* which suggested that racial others are anti-Christian, as well. In this meeting the group viewed a documentary entitled "DNA v. The Book of Mormon," wherein members of the Mormon church are confronted with scientific information about evolution that contradicts their beliefs. When the meeting ends, Morgan, who I consider a regular attendee by this point, approaches me as we, along with the other group members, are making our way towards the door. "So," she asked me, "are you working on a paper?" I told her that the research I described to the group when I began will be used in my honors senior thesis. After she asks me if I know her daughter or son-in-law,

both of whom are honors students (I don't), she asks: "So what's, like, the main topic of your thesis?" I respond by telling her that I am interested in observing how members of this group "do" Christianity. Morgan smiles: "So, what does the honors college think of that?" As I am thinking through my response, she begins describing her daughter's experience in her Honors 101 course. The professor of the course, who Morgan identifies in slightly hushed tones as a "Black woman," asked her students to write on "their justice system" for their first paper assignment. By remarking that the professor is a "Black woman," she simultaneously conveys what could be her notion of the information as necessary to the story's context, and what could be her awareness of a degree of controversy relating to her views and the current general climate of such topics as race and gender. Morgan goes on to describe how her daughter wrote a "beautiful paper" on Christian morality but was dissatisfied with the grade she earned. Morgan implies a belief that her daughter's professor is a *skeptic* when explaining that her daughter had to alter her "approach" to questions in class as a response to her professor's "standoffish" behavior. She then asks me if I have had any similar experiences as an honors student, which further indicates an understanding of the professor's active role in Morgan's understanding of her daughter's university experience by reflecting some degree of her expectation that I shared a similar experience. Morgan's and my conversation illuminated how, for these Apologists, even racial minorities are anti-Christian skeptics, especially when they are women in positions of authority.

Gregory Koukl's *Tactics*, the video lecture series group members viewed, provides one illuminating example of the identification of professors as *skeptics*. During a meeting in December, the group viewed a portion of the *Tactics* video lecture, wherein

Koukl defines what he calls “the professor’s ploy” for his audience. Koukl begins by describing instances in which professors “make it their professional goal to destroy the faith of every student in the audience.” He then expresses sympathy for those students who may make the “right-hearted...wrong-headed” decision to react in defense, or otherwise engage with the professor. Koukl discourages students from doing so, because, he explains to the audience, of a “law of nature,” stating: “The man behind the microphone has all the power.” There is a better plan of action: “Don’t disengage, use your tactics instead.” He emphasizes Apologists’ need to ask questions like “What do you mean by that?” and “How did you get to that conclusion?” “You’re drawing him out,” he tells the audience. Koukl repeatedly uses “the professor’s ploy” like a template of a social interaction to help his audience understand how to effectively avoid the “burden of proof.” He advises Apologists to use their “tactics” in these specific encounters with professors, which, in turn, suggests that “the professor” and the role of the *skeptic* are synonymous.

Koukl continues, warning viewers and the live audience of the possibility that the professor “catches on.” “Oh, you must be a Christian,” Koukl says, playing the role of “the professor” in this scenario. “If you’re the student,” he warns, “*don’t take the bait.*” He heavily emphasizes this point by raising his voice, clearly articulating each word, and syncopating the delivery (“don’t, take, the bait.”). “The bait” is professors’ questions about students’ beliefs. Questioning Christianity, he insists, is not Christian. People who question Christians are skeptics. Professors, according to Koukl, question Christianity, and are therefore skeptics. Koukl explains the “professor’s ploy” within the greater context of using “tactics” to engage the *skeptic*. These “tactics” involve asking questions

about others' beliefs. So, Koukl teaches his audience that inquiries about another person's beliefs are permissible, but any question by "the professor" is "bait." Professor's questions are intended to "destroy the faith" of their students, according to Koukl, deeming them anti-Christians, or *skeptics*.

In meetings that followed Koukl's description of the "professor's ploy" I observed other examples of defining the professor as a *skeptic*. Fred, Bob, and I were the only three to attend one meeting in January, so we talked casually for the duration of the meeting time rather than having a proper meeting. Both Bob and Fred, having mentioned their respective seminary educations multiple times in the past, expressed enthusiasm about some questions I had asked them about their experience. Bob exemplified how "the professor" may be understood as a *skeptic* in his response to my question of whether it is required, or highly recommended, to intend on becoming a church leader if one were to receive a seminary education. "...Not all pastors have a seminary degree," Bob explains. "So if I got my Master's degree from a seminary, could I teach religion or theology at a secular university?" I asked as a follow-up. "You *could*...but even though secular schools have religion departments," Bob explained, those spaces can be "hostile." He warned me about professors who "teach their own agenda," who are concerned about their "paycheck." Bob implies that he expects this behavior or hostility from "the professor." However, Bob explained later: "On the other hand... some seminaries have professors who do the same thing." Bob conveys what could be his belief in the "professor" as a *skeptic* specifically in the case of those employed by secular universities. Furthermore, Bob's amendment following his claim (condemning professors at "some seminaries") represents how "the professors" is a skeptic regardless of whether or not



their teachings are Christian. It also indicates that defining “the professor” as a *skeptic* is a more natural response when considering them to be specifically a professor at a “secular” university.

More group members attended the following week’s meeting, during which Bob taught the material from Koukl’s DVD lecture series, rather than having members view it. Bob explains what Koukl calls the “suicide tactic,” by describing “suicide statements.” He explains that these statements “contain a seed of its own destruction within it.” One example that Bob provides is the claim that “There is no truth.” He goes on to attribute this “suicide statement” specifically to universities: “We deal with it on our campuses today.” Bob’s claim shows how the university as an institution is a *skeptic* identity because the idea that “There is no truth,” is oppositional to Christian belief and needs to be confronted. Later, while he is still discussing the “suicide tactic,” Bob surveys the room and says, “There’s only two students here...be on the lookout for that stuff.” Bob specifically addresses the students in the group, conveying to group members that these “suicide statements” are more common within, or even unique to, the university setting. He advises the group: “If you have a professor” who is “a relativist,” he advises the group to ask the professor if they would allow “cheating on their tests.” He jokes that he imagines that the professor would not be okay with it. I felt curious at the time as to why Bob would advise these Apologists about how to engage professors, even after remarking on the small number of students present. Bob seems to suggest that “the professor” is not always found on a university campus.

Another example of the professor being defined as a *skeptic* occurred when Bob moved from the “suicide tactic” to “How to handle a steamroller.” He tells the group that

a “steamroller” is “someone who overpowers you.” Once more, Bob appeals to “the professor’s ploy” to give an example by likening the professor who questions Christianity to a “steamroller.” Rather than explaining how the professor is a “steamroller” in this scenario, he only suggests that group members should insist that they “just wanna know your [the professor’s] view.” Bob then describes “non-Christian...often liberal phrases” that may skew how others understand a person’s stated beliefs. “This is how Mormons can say their Christians,” he says, explaining that until you ask about their beliefs, Mormon beliefs can seemingly align with Christian beliefs. Bob had so recently explained “the professor’s ploy” as an example, which creates ambiguity about who makes these “often Liberal” statements. This, in turn, allows group members to identify “the professor” as the person who makes “non-Christian,” statements. Professors are identified, then, as “liberals,” “non-Christians,” or, to put it simply, *skeptics*.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis, I outlined the various individual identities and social groups which members of the Apologetics group dissolve into the *skeptic* category. This outline illuminates how the *skeptic* encapsulates a variety of ideas, which manifest at various levels (namely that of the individual, the institutional, and the ideological). It also exemplifies and supports the claim that evangelical Christian identities are almost entirely informed by who is *not* Christian. In this conclusion, I describe some directions that future research can pursue that can use this data to understand the fragility of these identities. Understanding how these identities have become fragile may provide reasonable explanation for evangelical Christians' ability to maintain their "embattled" status in contemporary U.S. society (Smith 1998).

For Apologetics group members, the skeptic's behavior becomes *symbolic* of his or her non-Christianity. For these Apologists, what was once understood as a potential result of non-Christian views (i.e., abortion, same-sex marriage, etc.) has become how they identify anti-Christians. Because distinction is fundamental to evangelical Christians' ability to continue "thriving," these Apologists have re-tooled their approach to engaging skeptics as a way to perform their identities (Smith 1998). Members achieve nothing more than the distinction of themselves from others. This distinction has become so essential as a characteristic of members' identities, it seems to be the only way to

achieve a successful performance of evangelical Christianity. So how has this affected American evangelicalism more broadly, as a religious movement?

There seems to have been a dissolution of “symbolic markers” for these Apologists to define boundaries between in-groups and out-groups (Smith 1998). Members remain “embattled” on their own accord, by their own means, and with full autonomy when determining who is and is not an evangelical Christian (Smith 1998). Previous research has suggested that religious and cultural pluralism has benefitted American evangelicalism by providing more groups for evangelical Protestants to identify as opposed to Christianity (Bean and Martinez 2014; Smith 1998). However, this claim is problematized when applying social identity complexity theory to understand how evangelicals define *out-groups*, as opposed to in-groups. With a higher degree of subcultural diversity comes the dissolution of more groups into the single category of *skeptic*. This could eventually result, as this research indicates, in the complete atomization of religious outsiders. In other words, the number of out-groups that evangelicals identify will continue to grow until the dissolution of outsiders into a salient identity results in a single out-group category. The ability to maintain the “embattled” status that strengthens American evangelicalism as a religious movement is sharpened, because evangelicals’ perceived out-groups have been consolidated (Smith 1998). There is only one group, the skeptics, against whom evangelical Christians feel embattled. What was once a high level of diversity in religious out-groups has been reduced to a level of almost no diversity. This is due to ambiguity about what evangelical Christians *are*, and avoiding discussion about why skeptics *are not* Christians, or anti-Christian.

Future research on evangelical identities should consider how this method of identity construction may result in a high degree of fragility in evangelical Christian identities. Scholars interested in evangelicals' "embattled" status should examine how evangelical Christian identities, being almost entirely informed by who and what they are not, resemble hegemonic masculine identities (Connell 2005; Smith 1998). Scholarship on masculinities describes how hegemonic ideals are very loosely defined and are informed mostly by an understanding of what is not feminine in a given social context. In other words, masculine identities are defined by a repudiation of femininity; these Apologist identities are defined by a repudiation of their own definition skepticism. Furthermore, much like the results from the fragility of hegemonic masculinities, this understanding could explain the degree of polarization that persists in contemporary U.S. society between religious groups, specifically evangelical Protestants, and religious or secular Others.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Balmer, Randall Herbert. 1989. *Mine eyes have seen the glory: A journey into the evangelical subculture in America*. 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Bean, Lydia and Brandon C. Martinez. 2014. Evangelical Ambivalence towards Gays and Lesbians. *Sociology of Religion* 75(3):395-417.
- Connell, R.W. 2005. *Masculinities*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hackett, Conrad and D. Michael Lindsay. 2008. Measuring evangelicalism: Consequences of different operationalization strategies. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47(3):499-514.
- Hodkinson, Paul. 2005. 'Insider research' in the study of youth cultures. *Journal of Youth Studies*. 8(2):131-149.
- Roccas, Sonia and Marilyn B. Brewer. 2002. Social identity complexity. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*. 6(2): 88-106.
- Pew Research Center. 2018. Religious landscapes study. *Pew Research Center*. Washington, D.C. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
- Smith, Christian. 1998. *American evangelicalism: Embattled and thriving*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Str.org. 2018. *Mission trips / Stand to reason*. <https://www.str.org/training/mission-trips>.

Whitehead, Andrew L. and Samuel L. Perry. 2015. A more perfect union? Christian nationalism and support for same-sex unions. *Sociological Perspectives*. 58(3):422-440.