

YOUR OWN PERSONAL JESUS: A CASE STUDY OF LIMINAL NONES AT THE
2015 BONNAROO MUSIC AND ARTS FESTIVAL

by

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract.....	iii
1. Introduction	1
Overview of Aims	2
Literature Review	4
Methodology	9
Liminal Nones at Bonnaroo	12
2. The Impact of Liminal Nones on the United States’ Religious and Political Landscape	15
Defining Terminology and Demographics	15
The United States’ Changing Religious Landscape	17
The United States’ Changing Political Landscape	21
Toward a Humanitarian Direction	24
3. Contextualizing the Worldviews of Liminal Nones	26
Liminal Nones’ Feelings Surrounding Religion and Secularism	26
Parental Influence	29
Religious Switching and Stability of Preference	31
Redefining Religion	34
4. Views on Morality and Varieties of Spiritual Expression	35
Views on Morality	36
Varieties of Spiritual Expression	40
Describing the Ineffable	43
5. Toward a Post-Dualistic, Transpersonal Stance on Religion	45
6. Conclusions	50
List of References	53
Biography	57

ABSTRACT

YOUR OWN PERSONAL JESUS: A CASE STUDY OF LIMINAL NONES AT THE 2015 BONNAROO MUSIC AND ARTS FESTIVAL

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The religiously unaffiliated, also referred to as “nones,” are a quickly rising population in the United States. Changing cultural life as part of religious and political discourse, the sub-group “liminal nones” is creating moral, open dialogues in the religious sphere while also liberalizing the political sphere. Globally, this rise reflects recent trends in France and England. Several scholars state liminal nones are creating a post-dualistic stance of religion in the United States, as they do not define themselves by the traditionally opposing categories of religion and secularism. Though reflective of both religious and secular traditions, liminal nones are redirecting the flow of these traditions toward more humanitarian, universal morals, and potentially creating a type of solidarity some philosophers state is missing in American society today (Butler et al. 2011; Habermas et al. 2010). This thesis is the result of an ethnographic study conducted in a liminal festival setting, suiting the demographic of the population, to gain insight as to the personal narratives of their worldviews and concepts of morality changing American

society today. By using the 2015 Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival as a case study and discussing liminal nones' views on values and morality, this thesis analyzes how these ideals reflect the rising, post-dualistic understanding of religion in the United States currently opening dialogues in the religious sphere and liberalizing the political landscape.

1. INTRODUCTION

Sixteen percent of Americans who identify as “generally religiously unaffiliated” often describe themselves as ‘spiritual’ (Ammerman 2013; Lim et al. 2010; O’Connell Killen and Silk 2004; Pew 2015a; Thomson-Devereaux 2013). It is often difficult to describe oneself in terms of spirituality. The term itself is so loosely defined by society that it becomes even more difficult to understand. To make matters more complicated are the various forms that spirituality holds for different people. One’s spirituality could be comprised of (or juxtaposed to) religion, humanity, nature, the cosmos, or any which way to develop their sense of self and being in the world (Albanese 2001). Spirituality is intrinsically aligned with our values, and one’s definition is highly contextualized with personal wants and needs; expectations from friends, family, institutions, and society in general; and even how we perceive our own understanding.

Over the past several years, Pew Gallup conducted polls surveying Americans’ religious affiliations. Pew researchers reported in 2015 that “nones,” or people who identify as having “no religious preference,” represented twenty-three percent of the population in the United States. A similar trend has been occurring recently in Europe, especially France and England, with nones having risen to seventy-four percent and seventy-six percent of the population, respectively; however, globally, nones represent roughly sixteen percent of the population (Pew 2015b). What is causing this recent

pattern? Seventy-seven percent of Americans claim a religious preference. Nones are comprised of two groups: “generally religiously unaffiliated,” and “atheist and agnostics.” Furthermore, sixteen percent of Americans identify as “generally religiously unaffiliated” and seven percent identify as “atheist and agnostic” (Pew 2015a). What does a worldview look like that is devoid of traditional categories of religion and secularism? What are the effects of this new category on the United States’ religious and political landscapes? And, furthermore, what is the moral foundation behind this rising post-dualistic, neutral language in the United States as suggested by some philosophers today (Butler et al. 2011; Habermas et al. 2010)? My research will focus on Americans who identify as “generally religiously unaffiliated,” referred to here as liminal nones (Lim et al. 2010; *see* Turner 1969), by using the 2015 Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival as a case study.

By using the 2015 Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival as a case study and discussing liminal nones’ views on values and morality, in this thesis, I intend to analyze how these ideals reflect a rising, post-dualistic understanding of religion in the United States while exploring concepts of social construction and subjectivity of expression, and assessing how this opens religious dialogues and liberalizes political landscapes.

Overview of Aims

Liminal nones are comprised of an immensely diverse population with people of all ages and backgrounds. Due to the lack of demographic identifiers for this population (Albanese 2001; Baker and Smith 2009; Lim et al. 2010), a problem arises since there is no identifiable community or common space for these people to gather and therefore, for

the anthropologist to conduct ethnography. Liminal nones have no church where they gather, and atheists and agnostics have little to no community base. Bonnaroo is a four-day music and arts festival in Manchester, Tennessee, providing (typically) American youth with the most current music from all genres. Bonnaroo provides an environment for alternative and freethinking college youth, as well as people of all ages and backgrounds, to gather in a place bursting with creativity – connectedness with both music and humanity. As an attendee, one must comply with the Bonnaroo code to “Prepare thyself. Play as a team. Radiate positivity. Respect the farm. Don’t be that guy/gal. [and] Stay true Roo.” This is a place of humbling humanity with 80,000 attendees camping peacefully in close quarters, sharing supplies, enjoying music and having a good time – exciting one’s spirit. Therefore, Bonnaroo seemed to be a ‘church’ for liminal nones, if any, to conduct an ethnographic case study.

In this thesis, I discuss the difficulty scholars face in describing the diverse demographic that liminal nones’ comprise (Conrad and Tamney 1985; Lim et al. 2010), in addition to their affect on the United States’ religious and political landscapes. Standard categories of religion are being deconstructed as liminal nones choose not to define themselves in terms of organized religion. Scholars state that liminal nones are liberalizing the United States’ normative Christian views to form a morality that is more compassionate toward the general welfare of humanity (Hadaway and Roof 1979; Hout and Fischer 2002; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2013). Additionally, I provide a contextualized analysis of liminal nones’ worldviews and the occurrence of religious switching. Religious switching is when someone chooses to change his or her religious identity from

that stated previously (Tamney 1989). By maintaining reverence for religious ideology and optimism for innovation, liminal ones are altering the flow of traditions in the United States (Habermas et al. 2010). Contributing to the necessity of literature in moral anthropology (Shweder and Menon 2014), I delve into liminal ones' views on morality and spiritual expression. Lastly, I examine the theories of Butler et al. (2011), Habermas et al. (2010), and Thomson-Devereaux (2013), who propose liminal ones can create a moral, universal language and more constructive coexistence in the United States if solidarity is achieved within the population.

Literature Review

In discussing matters of religion and secularism, we must be careful not to make epistemological assumptions and reduce the meanings of these two categories as merely opposing, or even that they *are* opposing. Scholars state the duality of 'religion and secular' was created by Euro-American, Enlightenment thinkers in order to avoid charged connotations of immorality by using terms such as 'atheist' (Asad 2003; Calhoun et al. 2011). By creating this distinction, secularism has developed a multi-layered history with the modern nation-state whereby religion is commonly viewed in the United States as infecting the secular, political sphere (Asad 2003). However, Calhoun et al. (2011) express that the proper boundaries of these categories are disputed throughout the world and that the present distinction in the United States is reflective of its roots in religious tradition, thus deeming opponents as immoral (Asad 2003; Calhoun et al. 2011). Asad (2003) expresses the difficulty in defining secularism stating, "the secular is neither singular in origin nor stable in its historical identity" (25). And as Calhoun et al. (2011)

state that anthropological inquiry into secularism remains in its infancy, Asad (2003) concurs that anthropologists have scarcely paid attention to the idea of the secular. Liminal nones do not conceptualize religion and secular as fixed categories but rather deconstruct this binary that has become commonplace in the United States today. This research will contribute to literature on the secular, and delve into the complexities that surround liminal nones' understanding of the secular today by examining their highly contextual narratives.

Liminal nones have existed in the United States for quite some time, but it is difficult to provide a precise range of dates because of their ambiguous identity categorization. John G. Condran and Joseph B. Tamney (1989) explore the historical rise of nones from 1957 to 1982, which reflects and analyzes earlier models for religious change (*see* Wuthnow 1978: 15-43) and examines how the American religious landscape has changed. Though the United States is considered a mixing bowl of sorts, seventy-one percent of Americans embrace Christian denominations, whereas only six percent claim non-Christian faiths (Pew 2015a). By neither associating with faith nor lack of faith, liminal nones are destroying this common binary understanding of religious identity in the United States. Liminal nones are quickly becoming a large minority with the potential to make waves in American religious and political life (Kurtzleben 2015; Pew 2014; Pew 2015a).

In an effort to understand why more people are defining themselves as generally religiously unaffiliated, scholars in recent years have conducted demographic studies on liminal nones (Baker and Smith 2009; Conrad and Tamney 1985; Hadaway and Roof

1979). The results of Baker and Smith's (2009) binary linear regression models show that demographics of nones are majority male, youth, with higher levels of education, living on the West Coast of the United States, without children, and of a liberal political stance. In fact, the highest regional adult population of nones is in the Pacific Northwest at twenty five percent (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004). Scholars predict that this rising liberal pattern will could have a strong impact on religious issues, such as abortion (Kurtzleben 2015; Pew 2014).

As many people's values and sense of morality stem from their religious traditions, research indicates that parental influence is one of the strongest influences surrounding liminal nones' worldviews (Manning 2013; Sensenig 2013; Vernon 1968). Most Bonnarooians discussed that their identity preferences were heavily influenced by the religious traditions of their parents. As witnessed at Bonnaroo, liminal nones did not particularly condone religion, but also disliked secularism (Cragun et al 2012). Instead, they exhibit a reverence for society in general, both religious and secular, and the traditions held by their parents, when constructing their identity. Jürgen Habermas states that this type of consideration is necessary in creating a post-religious and post-secular stance in the United States (cited in Butler et al. 2011). Reverence for the old traditions and optimism for the new are two key elements that liminal nones use in creating this stance.

When discussing matters of religious preference, the stability upon which liminal nones construct their preference is of importance. In the United States, thirty percent of nones identified with a religion just the previous year (Pew 2015a), so the credibility for

their preferences is questionable. Scholars researching the notion of ‘religious switching’ claim that this is an inherent problem for data collection as liminal nones are often transitioning from a religious background (Hadaway and Roof 1979; Lim et al. 2010; Olsen and Beckworth 2011). It is not surprising that liminal nones have unstable preferences as they deal with the influences from their parents and society at large while trying to formulate views of their own as a primarily youth population. Scholars suggest that the rise of nones is partially due to a paradigm shift where Americans are becoming more secular, and a result of this is generational replacement (Pew 2015a; Sensenig 2013). Scholars explore various worldviews, and how they are reflected in child rearing (Manning 2013) in addition to parental influence in general (Vernon 1968). Unfortunately, the literature does not address liminal nones with absent parental structures.

Expressivity and a Transpersonal Stance on Religion

Liminal nones believe in varying constructions of a higher power and express these spiritual beliefs in different ways. Tamney (1989) discusses innovation theory, which attempts to tease out motivations in one’s identification of preference, or lack thereof. Innovation theory delves into motivations, as more people are not attending formal religious gatherings, like church, as frequently. Motivations for preferences and/or switching preferences might underlie feelings of alienation, or a difference in desires, and so on. In concurrence with the research of Kurtzleben (2015) and Olsen and Beckworth (2011), all of the liminal nones interviewed at Bonnaroo stated they previously attended church, mosque, or synagogue and decided to depart, except for one, who stated she was

not raised religiously and never knew what church was until exposed to it by friends later as a teenager. Departing from church attendance allows liminal nones to construct their identities freely, creating a myriad of spiritualities by which they define themselves. Generally speaking, the ‘rainbows of expression’ Albanese (2001) discusses can generally be defined as an awareness of an underlying reverence for society, humanity, and the world. Liminal nones contextualize their understanding of the world in non-traditional ways that combine theories and values of both science and spirituality.

The moral stances of liminal nones at Bonnaroo primarily surrounded the notion of extending human compassion, with the assumption that it will be returned. They stated this in various ways, such as “the Golden Rule,” while others stated to do good and that good would be returned, and others even used the Hindu word ‘karma,’ yet explicitly stated they didn’t identify with this concept religiously. Scholars suggest that American society needs to embrace a neutralization of terms by reconceptualizing definitions of irreligion, secularism, and faith (Habermas et al. 2010), which is exactly what liminal nones are achieving. Richard Dworkin explores the concept of replacing the right to religious freedom with the right to “ethical independence,” not giving any special right to be fixated on a particular subject – in this case, religion (Thomson-Deveaux 2013). This type of action could broaden awareness of the tension and the lack of solidarity between religious and secular people. By redirecting the flow of traditions (Habermas et al. 2010), liminal nones have the potential to achieve a neutral, universal language of moral understanding in American that maintains compassion towards humanist views, regardless of religious or secular stance.

Methodology

Due to the overall ineffable nature surrounding spirituality, it is difficult to tease out the complexities of peoples' morality construction. Inherent difficulties surround what people do, what they say, and what they think they do, which makes this task all the more complex. I carried out this research through qualitative semi-structured interviews and a review of primary and secondary written sources. Since liminal nones only comprise sixteen percent of Americans, my goal was to speak to as many liminal nones as possible. It is important to note that although this case study observes the festival behaviors of liminal none outside of their normal daily lives, this should not have influenced answers in describing their beliefs. As I asked questions pertaining to their backgrounds, and views on morals and values, these answers would not likely change given the setting. However, the festival atmosphere undoubtedly reflected humanitarian appreciation in participants' answers since they were submerged in an unavoidably social event. This research is similar in theory to Pike's (2001) ethnographic study of neopagan festival culture, whereby Bonnaroo provides a liminal atmosphere in which people might suspending their usual rules of living, and thus, creating community (Turner 1969). The same can be applied to Bonnaroo, Pike (2001) describes the festival community as paradoxically comprised of non-conformists who feel ostracized by mainstream culture, yet unified by their shared marginalized experiences in counterculture. Therefore, though liminal nones already experience liminality, the igniting sense of community among youth, alternative, and counterculture at festivals might entice liminal nones to attend.

I conducted sixteen interviews at the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival over two days in June 2015 – with eleven males and five females. I walked to the vendors in camp at Bonnaroo on the mornings of June 11th and 12th and held a sign that read, “SPIRITUAL BUT NOT RELIGIOUS? BRIEFLY TALK TO GRAD STUDENT ABOUT YOUR ALTERNATIVE SPIRITUALITY!” Many festival attendees were walking around, checking out the vendors, while others sat under the shade of a tree line. I purposefully did not approach any participants because I did not want them to feel coerced in any way. Also, I was aware of a potential bias of being a female that would make women more comfortable talking to me. I, therefore, did not want to skew the demographic by approaching people. Instead I let them freely approach me. Most of the participants who approached me were with friends, but I made it clear that the interviews would be conducted privately, to which they were obliged to shortly occupy themselves. I refer to liminal nones at Bonnaroo generally as the ‘participants.’ Interviews were conducted with complete anonymity so as to protect participants’ privacy. Therefore, no participants’ identities will be discussed specifically, thus eliminating the need for pseudonyms. I conducted an investigation of primary and secondary written sources in order to assess what scholars are currently stating about liminal nones, and looked at history for insight into patterns and understandings of applications for research in the future. The George Mason IRB approved this research [759788-1].

The festival environment that constituted this study was undoubtedly *liminal* in that many festival attendees dressed and behaved in ways that they probably would not normally frequent in their daily lives. In the spirit of experiencing live music, many wore

what they might consider to be the brightest, flashiest, most outlandish clothing they own, simply for the fun of it. Tie-dye shirts, long flowing skirts, furry legwarmers, and dangly jewels were some common notable fashions. The heat provided many scantily clothed attendees—others wearing nothing at all. As one might assume from a large festival, the majority of attendees I interviewed were young adults, mostly between the ages of nineteen and twenty-three. And as can be assumed with a ‘party scene’, many festival attendees were observed relishing in their youth (regardless of age)—engaging in recreational, Bacchanalian behaviors with different substances, dancing with hoops and fire, and generally having a festive, enjoyable time. In spite of this lax and carefree description, we are to not trivialize these participants. Bonnaroo provides a festival setting that creates a community for liminal nones (and many others) to gather based upon their similar music preferences, and these behaviors are to be expected. However, these exhibitions of alternative clothing, music, behaviors, and styles are indicative of their alternative views, spiritualities, and morals. And as alternative spiritualities can harness innovation (O’Connell Killen and Silk 2004), I seek to further examine the implications of these alternative spiritualities in the religious and political spheres of the United States.

My focus on irreligiousness as a field of study largely derives from my own response to the adverse conditions of my upbringing. I was raised in a low-income housing development, in circumstances difficult for those to imagine who did not grow up in a similar way. My grandmother played an active role in my life and she sought comfort in the Mormonism, which formed the foundation for her worldview. I reacted

with ambivalence, finding comfort neither in religion nor in the alleged “character building” that Mormonism claimed adversity provided; I wanted to find an alternative understanding of the world. My experiences led me to embrace empathy, to form a relativist outlook on human suffering, and to address metaphysical questions more pragmatically and less sentimentally. I developed an irreligious stance, grounded in reality yet sensitive to meaning. Therefore, when reading about the recent rise of nones in the United States, I was intrigued as to how this population formed their worldview – neither religious nor secular, how they viewed morality, and how this would affect the future of the United States’ religious and political landscapes.

Liminal Nones at Bonnaroo

Pew (2015a) reported that in the U.S., nones have increased in total population by thirteen percent since 1970. Liminal nones comprise the majority of nones at sixteen percent of the American population, whereas atheists comprise three percent, and agnostics comprise four percent (Pew 2015a). Pew also reported in 2014 that liminal nones held the largest population increase of nones by four percent since 2007, but there has been little analysis done to assess the pattern of increase (Baker and Smith 2009; Vernon 1968). As Lim et al. (2010) project, perhaps “America is charting a path similar to Europe, where those who are neither very religious nor specifically nonreligious comprise half the national population, or it will continue to be one of the most religious nations in the world” (616). I analyze the history of liminal nones in the United States and how their liberal stances are creating new categories in both religious and political spheres.

This anthropological investigation blurs boundaries further as to the nature of defining religion, providing a fresh look as to how people implement value and meaning in their lives in a growing, non-traditional population. There is growing research on how atheists and agnostics construct their secular worldviews, and there is endless literature available on religious worldviews (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004). However uniquely, liminal ones hold values that are neither wholly secular, nor wholly religious (Albanese 2001; Lim et al. 2010; O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004; Thomson-Devereaux 2013). The relationships liminal ones hold between religion and secularism are filled with complexities that must be heavily contextualized. Habermas et al. (2010) state that liminal ones' general stance understands secularism in a way that redirects the flow of religious tradition instead of alienating believers. This deconstructs the dualist categories of religion and secularism in the United States since people are defining their identities much more fluidly and complexly than ever before (Habermas et al. 2010). I investigate how liminal ones construct their worldviews and the highly contextual narratives of the influence surrounding their preference.

Secondly, as liminal ones are a diverse population, naturally they exhibit a vast range of beliefs. I seek to understand liminal ones' views on morality and the various ways they express those beliefs. Several liminal ones I interviewed identified themselves by descriptions instead of labels, and in fact stated their dislike for labels, which was additionally complex in regard to managing data. With this, concepts of meaning and morality become all the more unique to the individual when unaligned with a religious institution, nor a body of secular minded people. Despite liminal ones

presenting a diverse demographic, the moral stances of liminal nones at Bonnaroo were nearly all the same: love and respect. How do liminal nones apply moral stances of human compassion to their lives? How will expressions of these beliefs affect the United States' religious and political landscapes? I explore the depths of liminal nones' beliefs and how their understandings of human nature and morality hold hope for a more compassionate stance on humanity in the United States.

Lastly, I discuss how liminal nones deconstruct dualist notions of religion vs. secularism, and how their reverence for society creates a less anthropocentric vision for the future of American religion and politics. The worldviews and moral stances held by liminal nones are creating a post-dualistic concept of religion in the United States, one that is not restricted by categories of 'religious' or 'secular' (Habermas et al. 2010). These views are less anthropocentric in the sense that liminal nones express value on extending general transcendent compassion instead of focusing on needs of the self. As liminal nones at Bonnaroo largely express respect for differences, this entails consideration of both religious and secular stances alike. Liminal nones provide a post-dualistic, transpersonal stance on religion, developing new concepts and categories with respect to both religious and secular traditions.

2. THE IMPACT OF LIMINAL NONES ON THE UNITED STATES' RELIGIOUS AND POLITICAL LANDSCAPES

Fifty-six million nones live in the United States today—an increase of roughly nineteen million nones since 2007 (Pew 2015a). Scholars studying this population know that nones are not only comprised of atheists and agnostics (Greer and Roof 1992; Hout and Fischer 2002), but also of the religiously unaffiliated know as liminal nones. This rapid increase is impacting the United States' religious and political landscapes in ways that are progressive and unique—creating new categories, respectively. Because liminal nones are neither religious nor secular, this places them in an opportune, neutral position to create open dialogue in religious discourse. Also in accordance with this stance, liminal nones are directing the course of American politics towards more liberal, humanitarian issues, and deconstructing dualist modes of thinking.

Defining Terminology and Demographics

Due to the elusive nature of liminal nones' identity, arriving at a suitable term for this population was not without difficulty. Scholars agree the term “nones” oversimplifies the diversity of this group (Conrad and Tamney 1985; Lim et al. 2010), however, they remain indecisive as to what should be a suitable replacement. Lim et al. (2010) warn of labeling such a population as ‘unchurched believers’ or ‘religious privatists’ because even those labels are sweeping assumptions of a certain religiously stable disposition for such a diverse population. The original overarching term for this population being

“nones” actually paints them in a negative fashion, inferring that they are literally *nothing*. In fact, the term itself describes what they are *not* instead of what they *are* (Lim et al. 2010). The ineffable nature of liminal nones’ worldview descriptions does not mean that they do not have religious or political positions. However, developing terminology is problematic when attempting to describe a *lack* of belief, for which the opposition is the standard in the United States (Pew 2015a).

‘Liminal nones’ is a term borrowed by Lim et al. (2010), which means that they are wavering on the cusp of religious and irreligious identity. This is in contrast to ‘stable nones’, who are atheists and agnostics. ‘Stable nones’ are considered ‘stable’ because they state clearly and definitively that they are atheist or agnostic. Lim et al. (2010) state that the first part of this term harkens to Victor Turner’s (1969) concept of ‘liminality.’ Turner (1969) discusses the Ndembu ritual where ‘liminals’ were subjects who redefined their identity by transitioning to a religious state. However, the term ‘liminal’ as used here does not refer to those who are temporarily transitioning to another status, but rather their identity is more situational. And with this, maintaining a weakened sense of attachment to religious tradition maintains liminality (Lim et al. 2010). As liminal nones are not particularly *transitioning* to a religious state on a trajectory path, they are actually creating a new religious category altogether. Liminal nones hold a unique position where they identify with values that are neither atheist nor agnostic, but rather diversely and individually constructed.

Liminal nones are comprised of a vastly diverse population, for which a demographic pattern is difficult to describe. However, academics who study this rapidly

increasing population generally describe liminal nones as young, male, and college educated (Conrad and Tamney 1985; Hadaway and Roof 1979; Hayes 2000; Pew 2015a), but even these identifiers fail to capture the complex demographic of this population given the vast range in people's age, sex, race, education, etc. Baker and Smith (2008) state that researchers need to focus on the diversity within nones and examine the different groups that comprise this category. Thus, scholars state youthful countercultures have higher frequencies of being opposed to organized religion than other age groups (Conrad and Tamney 1985), which made Bonnaroo (a popular music festival among youth) a suitable location for an ethnographic case study.

The United States' Changing Religious Landscape

Since the highest regional population of nones—twenty-five percent—is in the Pacific Northwest (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004), it is important to consider the characteristics of this demographic pattern. Unfortunately, as an ethnographic study in the Pacific Northwest was not suitable at this time, the location of Bonnaroo fulfilled the general demographics considerably well. As part of American westward expansion in the mid-1800s, people moved west in search of free individual pursuits without previous ties—and this included individualized religiousness. Historically, the Pacific Northwest has remained relatively non-religious due to peoples' attraction to the physical grandeur and awe-inspiring topographical variety of the landscape (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004). O'Connell Killen and Silk (2004) go on to state that other possible historical explanations for a higher population of liminal nones in the Pacific Northwest include: (1) eroded connections to family and community, (2) abandonment of institutionalized

connections, and (3) reflection of churches in the wake of late Industrial Capitalism. Today, liminal nones in the Pacific Northwest embrace forms of alternative spirituality and maintain a reverence for the landscape (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004). A look to the Pacific Northwest indicates a progressive model for liminal nones to potentially establish solidarity among a diverse and individualized group.

Most liminal nones at Bonnaroo stated they were once religious, but disassociated from religion as they matured as young adults. Conrad and Tamney (1985) state that liminal nones disassociated from religion for largely two reasons: (1) disinterest regarding the structure of religion as an institution, or (2) disinterest in the cultural values of belief. Disinterest in the structure of religion as an institution refers to characteristics of the religious organization itself, for example, disliking church leaders who might be considered pro-management, and therefore, not aligning with the social interests of a worker. Disinterest in the cultural values of belief refers to characteristics of belief itself, for example, disliking the belief in God because of insufficient scientific evidence (Conrad and Tamney 1985). Furthermore, we can distinguish populations of structural nones (those who are no longer religious due to the structure of religion as an institution) and of cultural nones (those who are no longer religious due to the cultural values of belief). In terms of structure, working-class alienation from churches and religion began at the turn of the twentieth century, but was largely overcome by the 1950s (Conrad and Tamney 1985). However, this only explains structural nones in terms of class, leaving other structural areas like race, gender, and sex identity; this was important to one of my participants and could be studied in future scholarly investigations. Nevertheless, the

paradigm shifted as cultural nones have been most rapidly rising in the United States since the 1960s (Hadaway and Roof 1979; *see* Wuthnow 1978), which is not surprising as this was a progressive time for culture change. In terms of ideology, “the baby boomer generation brought growth of self and earth-based spirit” (O’Connell Killen and Silk 2004: 147), which continues to gain support with liminal nones today. The baby boomer generation in the United States brought a different cultural mode of thought that liminal nones have been inspired by, but their grassroots perspectives need to be revived in order to create solidarity amongst liminal nones and create community.

In the United States, the contexts that shape our worldviews, especially in regard to meaning and value, have largely been shrouded in Christian values. The United States is home to more Christians than anywhere else in the world (Pew 2015a). More importantly, the very notion of what morality means, and our concept of what we as Americans consider ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ has been vastly influenced and constructed by Christian traditions (Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2013). As Pew (2015a) reports, seventy-one percent of Americans identify as Christian today, however, this has sharply declined in the past few years, especially among youth—dropping nearly eight percent in the past seven years. It is important to note that identification as Christian does not note the extent of religiosity or practice, other than as described through records of church attendance. Of the sixteen liminal nones interviewed at Bonnaroo, fourteen stated that they were raised Christian. Of the remaining two, one stated she was raised with no religion, and one stated he was raised Muslim. Of the fourteen participants who described themselves as being raised Christian, three of them had parents belonging to different faiths: one

Catholic/Jew, one Catholic/Wiccan, and one Quaker/Baptist/Methodist. The remaining eleven participants' sects are as follows: five Catholic, two Southern Baptist, two Christian (sect not described), one Methodist, and one Mormon. In my research, some participants stated they truly considered themselves religious before denouncing their Christian identity, while others stated they only labeled themselves as such to appease their parents' preferences. Though liminal nones are steadily increasing while Christianity is in decline in the United States, many liminal nones maintain a reverence towards religious tradition, which is essential in creating open dialogues that transcend religious categories.

A common part of the Christian tradition is church attendance, which has been in steep and rapid decline in the United States over the past couple of decades (Pew 2014; Putnam and Campbell 2010). In the 1940s and 1950s, church attendance was seen as a means to acquire social status, capital, and to distill the American way of life (Olsen and Beckworth 2011), however, since the 1990s, church attendance has steadily decreased in the United States (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Liminal nones are not part of the "committed core" of regular church attendees, but rather their attendance has become increasingly nominal (Olson and Beckworth 2011). Less than fifty percent of nones attend church *sometimes* (Kurtzleben 2015). Additionally, Millennials entering adulthood (those born 1981-1996) attend church less than older generations (those born prior to 1981) (Pew 2015a). Several participants expressed no longer supporting the cultural values that religion provided stating they disliked attending church; others stated church "felt forced," provided "social conditioning," and was boring. One of my participants

went on to further state that his mother went to the extent to provide him with incentives, like going out to eat, if he attended church. It is no doubt that these negative connotations indicate that liminal nones show disinterest in the ritual activity of church attendance – both its message and its routine nature.

Despite decreases in both Christian affiliation and church attendance, an increase in the amount of liminal nones does not mean that people are becoming less religious (Conrad and Tamney 1985). In fact, most liminal nones do believe in a God of some kind (Pew 2015a; Albanese 2001) – either an entity, or a higher power, or whatnot. One-third of nones state that religion is still important to society to some extent (Kurtzleben 2015), so it is clear that liminal nones are not *antitheists*, or being against the idea of God. Proponents of secularization theory state that fleeing from organized religion and a decline in religious affiliation indicates that people are becoming more secular (Cimino and Lattin 1998; Greer and Roof 1992; Hout and Fischer 2002; Roof 1993,1999). However, although liminal nones are disassociating themselves with organized religion, this does not imply that they are becoming more secular because they are not rejecting religion itself. In fact, a few liminal nones at Bonnaroo distinctively clarified that they were not atheist or agnostic even though that was already determined by participation in the study (Hout and Fischer 2002), and it was clear that they held negative connotations toward that preference. Although liminal nones disassociate from both religion and secularism, this provides them with a neutral stance and bias towards neither category.

The United States' Changing Political Landscape

As one's religious preference is indicative of his or her values, these values reflect in how one engages with politics. As liminal nones embrace new spirituality, with new spirituality comes innovation – shifting authority from institutions to individuals and promoting creativity (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004). As liminal nones are thought to be largely liberal in their politics, this is due to the demographic pattern that youth and educated people tend to hold more liberal views (Hout and Fischer 2002). Because of this association with youth, liminal nones are vastly underrepresented at the polls – representing only twelve percent of the electorate in 2012 (Kurtzleben 2015).

Participants expressed the importance of extending compassion – seeing value in quite literally everything, big or small. Liminal nones consider the implications of environmental degradation as a moral and spiritual issue, which is reflective in political issues regarding climate change, speciesism, human exploitation of resources, wilderness preservation (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004), public health, sustainability, and water accessibility. Liminal nones maintain mindfulness of human connection in conjunction with all things (O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004) and the political implications that lie therein are creating a boost in the liberal sphere.

In conjunction with extending compassion, liminal nones stress the importance of humanitarian issues as part of their worldview and values, which is reflected in their political preferences. Hadaway and Roof (1979) agree that nones tend to exhibit more liberal political and moral values, which lend themselves to more flexible lifestyles. Liminal nones express the freedom of lifestyle choice in their politics, such as with marriage equality, abortion, and Separation of Church and State (Kurtzleben 2015).

Interestingly enough, marriage equality became legalized in the United States a few months after I conducted my fieldwork, strengthening political backing for issues that are important to liminal nones. According to some of my interviews, there could likely be a shift to more people-based politics as liminal nones focus on more humanitarian issues – striving toward happiness and a good quality of life.

As the vast majority of Americans remains religious, many who identify as religious (and liminal nones) hold negative connotations toward atheists and agnostics. According to a Pew 2014 poll, fifty-three percent of Americans state that they would be *least likely* to vote an atheist president into office, transcending any negatively associated racial or national affiliations. Only four percent of Americans said they would be *more likely* to vote for an atheist. In the upcoming 2016 election, the only running presidential candidate not openly religious is Senator Bernie Sanders, who clearly states that he is not a practicing Jew (Kurtzleben 2015). For a politician to denounce faith would be social suicide as the vast majority of Americans are Christian. However, in the same way that liminal nones express negative views of atheists and agnostics, they also express negative views of religious believers. Perhaps obviously, liminal nones' must hold at least somewhat negative connotations towards both of those stances or else they would not otherwise opt out from identifying with either category. Therefore, liminal nones present a neutral stance where optimism toward creating a more cohesive understanding of morality overrides any potentially negative connotation toward either religious or secular people.

Although a large minority of nones live in the United States, they are a neglected category because politicians are not engaging their issues. Greg Smith, associate director of research at the Pew Research Center stated this “makes the nones one of the biggest, but least noticed stories in American politics” (Kurtzleben 2015). Kurtzleben (2015) goes on to state that as diverse of a group as nones are, it would be difficult to appeal to all of them at once on a broad spectrum of issues, however, issues of extending human compassion and environmental degradation are larger than ourselves, which is where liminal nones could make headway in politics to help others in need.

Kurtzleben (2015) states that liminal nones could make waves in politics for the Republican Party. Kurtzleben (2015) cites the 2012 election as an example where seventy-nine percent of Evangelicals voted for Romney (openly Mormon), and seventy percent of people who were religiously unaffiliated voted for Obama. However, as the median age of nones dropped from 38 in 2007 to 36 in 2015, Millennials hold greater power in swaying politics due to their more active participation (Pew 2015a).

Toward a Humanitarian Direction

Despite the current research on liminal nones, there is still little conclusion as to what this rising pattern means for the United States due to the diverse individuality of the demographic (Lim et al. 2010; O’Connell Killen and Silk 2004). However, although this is only so much seen as a pattern so far, this population is rapidly rising and changing the United States’ religious and political landscapes towards more humanitarian stances. Liminal nones are developing new religious categories – both respecting the religious traditions they were raised with (largely Christian) and creating new structure for the

teachings and church attendance they disliked. Liminal nones are creating greater backing for liberal politics, but they need to develop solidarity amongst community members (especially youth) if they want to make a change in the United States' political sphere. Although the history of liminal nones is rather recent, scholars are continuing to study this rapidly increasing population, and this research contributes to that scholarship.

3. CONTEXTUALIZING THE WORLDVIEWS OF LIMINAL NONES

Family, friends, peers, and other social forces shape our worldviews, values, and morals. Liminal nones feelings regarding both religion and secularism allow them to both disassociate with these groups and also extend respect in order to maintain a neutral stance. Holding views that are neither religious nor secular (Albanese 2001; Lim et al. 2010; O'Connell Killen and Silk 2004; Thomson-Devereaux 2013), liminal nones develop humanitarian morals in unique and individual ways. Expectedly, these morals are largely shaped and influenced by their parents. Many liminal nones at Bonnaroo expressed appreciation toward their parents' for aiding in the construction of their own morals. However, due to the instability of many liminal nones preferences, sometimes religious switching occurs (Lim et al. 2010; Conrad and Tamney 1985; Hadaway and Roof 1979), which complicates assessing data. Liminal nones preferences tend to surround a combination of desired lifestyle and social obligation that is then expressed in various alternative spiritualities (Albanese 2001). The narratives that surround liminal nones' worldviews are highly contextualized and must be analyzed before seeing how they affect American society.

Liminal Nones' Feelings Surrounding Religion and Secularism

Although, ultimately, liminal nones exhibit a sense of religious estrangement, and thus, reject religious identity (Roof 1978; Tamney 1989; Wuthnow 1978), they hold a

great deal of respect for religious traditions and even attribute aspects of their morals to these traditions. Many participants stated they surveyed different traditions and adopted ideals into his or her new religious construct as they saw fit (such as the Hindu and Buddhist concepts of karma); however, they also expressed disassociation from the religious connotation. Roughly one in five nones living in the United States pray daily (Thomson-Devereaux 2013:3), but the structure of organized religion itself is absent for them. Not to completely disregard religious tradition, one of my participants stated, “The words people wrote [religious texts] – they do have a purpose to try to better humanity, but a lot gets lost with translations.” As a result, liminal nones are changing the definition of what it means to be religious as they choose which principles are important to their lives.

In conjunction with respect for religious tradition, liminal nones neither condone nor disapprove entirely of the function it can provide in creating social community. Liminal nones generally do not attend church, but like one of my participants expressed, these rituals can hold a purpose for American society, such as participating in religious holidays for children that have since generally lost their religious association. And as rituals are social as well as individual events, this could be a reason as to why liminal nones lack solidarity and community (Thomson-Devereaux 2013). Some participants held positive views of religion, stating that religion provided “spiritual ritual needed to make yourself feel harmonized with the people around you” and that religion stemmed from the need to cope with death. Other participants held more negative feelings toward religion. One stated, “I do not need to confide in something that is not there to do good”

and another said to me, “I believe in human moral values without needing a Jesus-mascot to reason.” Clearly, liminal nones are not becoming more secular in the sense that they lack the belief in God, but they are becoming more secular by disengaging in traditional, organized religion.

Liminal nones have created a new conceptual category for how to define themselves in terms of religion, however, they are careful to disassociate themselves from secularism as well. As many liminal nones at Bonnaroo expressed negative sentiments regarding atheism and agnosticism, they stated that they *had* explored both secularism and religion in equal respect. One participant expressed that when he identified as atheist/agnostic, this was a depressing time for him. Like many other religions, accepting the atheist notion that life ends at death troubled some participants who stated, “I could never say we just die” and “There’s more to life than just dying.” Although New Atheists made atheism a ‘pop success’ in the United States as of recent years, their zealous attitudes and obnoxious antagonism are not readily accepted by liminal nones (Thomson-Devereaux 2013). One of my participants attested to this negative notion stating that he thought atheists held a “club mentality.” Liminal nones agree: “Many millions of people who count themselves as atheists have convictions and experiences similar to and just as profound as those that believers count as religious. They say that though they do not believe in a ‘personal’ god, they nevertheless believe in a ‘force’ in the universe ‘greater than we are’” (Dworkin 2013: 4). In the same way that liminal nones are disenfranchised by religion, they are also disenfranchised by atheism and agnosticism, leaving them to construct their own categories.

Parental Influence

As is common knowledge, parents are powerfully involved in the socialization of their children. They strongly shape liminal nones' worldviews (Manning 2013; Sensenig 2013; Vernon 1968; Wilson and Sherkat 1994), and several participants stated they previously identified with the religion of their parents. Baker and Smith (2009) found a correlation between a person's lack of religious affiliation and the lack of religious preference of one's friends and family. However, this is true for religious affiliation as well—we tend to associate with those in our immediate environment. Nelson (1999) states that interfaith parents (parents belonging to different faiths) are more likely to have a non-religious child than religious parents. And with nearly four-in-ten marriages in the United States being of inter-faith (Pew 2015a), this could be one factor in the growing population of liminal nones. In this same vein, Zhai et al. (2008) also suggest that liminal nones are more common in environments of parental divorce where religious education is usually less prominent. As Thomson-Devereaux (2013) states there is growing literature on how to raise children in a nonreligious household, concurrently, liminal nones are destigmatizing American social norms about how to raise children with morals. As is understood, people are most likely going to identify with the religion (or lack thereof) of the parents, at least until maturity and into adulthood, but liminal nones are not completely disregarding these traditions altogether. Information regarding those without parents is unknown at this time.

Since liminal nones are neither religious nor secular, it is no question that children of liminal nones fluctuate in their religious preference. However, although many children

of liminal nones also identify as having no religious preference, Lim et al. (2010) state that it is only about one-third of liminal nones' children who also have no religious preference, whereas two-thirds of atheists and agnostics' children also had no religious preference. It is no surprise that more children of atheists and agnostics identify as such being that this is a more stable position than liminal nones in terms of religious preference. Pew (2015a) reports that thirty-four percent of American adults identify with a religion different than the one they were raised, which has increase six percent since 2007. And as Hadaway and Roof (1979) found in the General Social Survey between 1973 and 1977, roughly two-thirds of people who were raised with no religion identified with a religious preference later in adulthood; therefore, due to this conflicting information among scholars, no real pattern can be seen to identify how liminal nones associate or disassociate with their parents in a religious context. Although religious preference is not necessarily causal in the next generation, there is evidence that the worldviews of liminal nones are rapidly increasing, which is reflective of influential religious traditions.

As parents are aids of socialization, it is important to assess how liminal nones disengage from the religion of their parents, yet continue to maintain a positive relationship with them. Several participants expressed admiration for their parents, to whom they attributed influencing their moral stance. However, they also expressed they felt that their parents were open-minded people themselves to begin with, despite their religious preference; this is not to say that the extent of someone's religiosity makes them a moral person, only that ascribing to a religion means that one is choosing to adhere to a

specific dogma. Of the other liminal nones at Bonnaroo who did not mention their parents in regard to morality construction, the extent of these relationships is unknown. Therefore, as selection and reference groups allow people to hold similar preferences (Baker and Smith 2008), it becomes clear that the parents of liminal nones held moral stances that were more situational—not reliant upon strict adherence to religious dogma. And in this way, we even see that the Generation X parents of liminal nones have somewhat shifted toward interpreting religion in ways that are more situational instead of stable, leaving their Millennial generation children to follow in a similar fashion (Baker and Smith 2008).

Naturally, people tend to ascribe to the preferences of their family and friends, as well as adhering to general social norms. Therein still lies a problem (Baker and Smith 2008; Conrad and Tamney 1985); liminal nones do not exhibit a pattern beyond generally having previously identified with the religion of their parents, which is not unusual since parents aid socialization. However, as liminal nones have refined their preferences, they stay wary of labels that might wrongly describe their beliefs. Liminal nones exhibit a multidimensional worldview that is reflective of the traditions of their parents and does not dismiss them simply because they do not fully agree. Liminal nones are not interested in establishing new dogma, but in attempting to improve and make neutral what ideals are already important to Americans.

Religious Switching and Stability of Preference

Religious switching (or changing ones religious identity) could occur for various reasons, namely intermarriage, social mobility, or cultural crisis (Tamney 1989).

Collecting information from the Faith Matters Study, General Social Survey, and American National Election study, Lim et al. (2010) state that thirty percent of liminal nones identified with a religious group one year later when interviewed for a follow-up study. However, Lim et al. (2010) also found that there was no significant change in their beliefs or practices. Therein lies a problem where some people are changing their preferences in regard to the *label* and not their *beliefs*. Additionally, the study found that less than seventy percent of people identifying as “nothing in particular” reported the same preference just one year later. This is in contrast to more stable religious positions, such as Christians, who reported upwards of ninety-two percent consistency the following year (Lim et al. 2010). However, being more stable in ones position does not mean that it is a better position—with liminal nones choosing to establish new neutral ground. Nonetheless, the problem of religious switching remains, which makes data collection difficult since scholars can neither measure nor anticipate who might change their preference and for what reason.

The stability of liminal nones’ preferences does not reflect their actions, meaning that preference merely surrounds the outward identification and label of such to American society. Several participants spoke negatively regarding labels stating, “I don’t like labels. Labels lead to generalizations and judgments” and “People who even say the same labels have different values and understandings.” Liminal nones’ appear reflective regarding the subjectivity surrounding labels, which gives the inclination that stability of preference is not that important in the first place. However, if liminal nones are identifying as religious after having already identified as “generally religiously

unaffiliated” a year earlier, the *intention* is of importance here. Whether liminal nones are switching to a religious preference because they truly consider themselves religious on their own accord, or whether they have been influenced to identify as such by some other means is uncertain in the literature at this time. This raises the issue as to how many liminal nones truly exist in the United States if some are choosing to continue to label themselves in terms of religion yet maintain a liminal stance in terms of belief.

In this same vein, the *intention* of identification is of importance as this gives context for the decision of preference. Sometimes it is the case that an omission or disapproval of information infers the approval of something else, which can be difficult to extract in terms of someone’s personal beliefs. This notion is what Cragun et al. (2012) states is implied by the results of their study using data from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS). What this study showed was not so much that nones exhibited *approval* or condoning of religion, but a *deterrence* or fear of association with non-religion (Cragun et al. 2012). This notion lends itself to liminal nones spoken to during my fieldwork, the tendency being that they spoke more reverently of the idea of religion rather than the idea of secularism. However, liminal nones express feeling repressed with both religion and secularism, necessitating them to establish new ground and forge new categories in regard to religious preference.

Clearly liminal nones are not becoming more secular as they also disassociate from atheism and agnosticism. Deterring from secular labels could also account for the stability of preference noted in Lim et al.’s (2010) study. Liminal nones could have deterred from identifying as “generally religiously unaffiliated” and opted for a religious

preference instead a year later in order to not be negatively associated as atheist or agnostic. Despite this, the rate of retention for liminal nones has increased to fifty-three percent (up seven percent from 2007) – still identifying as religiously unaffiliated into adulthood; and of Millennials, nones hold the highest retention rate of all the religious groups (Pew 2015a). Therefore, since religious preference is more situational than stable (Lim et. 2010), scholars strive to examine the stability of these preferences to determine potential patterns nonetheless.

Redefining Religion

As liminal nones are disenfranchised by both religion and atheism/agnosticism, they are creating new categories and redefining what it means to be religious in the United States. Deeply influenced by their parents, liminal nones remain respectful of the religious traditions in which they were raised and do not completely disregard them. Even as studies have been done to assess the rising population of liminal nones, follow up studies showed that religious switching occurs somewhat frequently with this population, which complicates data assessment for stability of preference. By creating a worldview that respects the traditions of their parents and greater American society, liminal nones can extend their knowledge of different worldviews to bridge gaps in understanding for both religious and secular people alike. Even though studies show that stability of preference wanes for liminal nones, liminal nones will become more stable in their positions as their humanitarian worldviews continue to rise in the United States.

4. VIEWS ON MORALITY AND VARIETIES OF SPIRITUAL EXPRESSION

Liminal nones describe themselves as ‘spiritual, but not religious,’ or believing in some sort of higher power, or embracing a form of grassroots spirituality, etc. Nevertheless, these descriptions distinguish liminal nones as conceptualizing something outside of themselves without the vessel of organized religion (Pew 2014). This is not to say that many liminal nones do not attribute their morality to the historical religious traditions (or newer secular ones) they were introduced to as a part of American society, but the formulation of these principles can hold different values than the traditions they stem from. With liminal nones providing an increase in alternative spiritualities, O’Connell Killen and Silk (2004) state this is creating innovative ways of thinking in the United States. This newly contrived morality might hold influence from religious traditions, but the social implications and applications of such could hold very different outcomes for American society.

With optimism toward the future of alternative spiritualities in the United States, Kripal (2008) asks “Can we revision ‘America’ not as a globally hated imperial superpower, not as a ‘Christian nation’ obsessed with mad and arrogant apocalyptic fantasies abroad and discriminatory ‘family values’ at home, not as a monster consumer of the world’s ever dwindling resources, but as a universal human ideal yet to be fully realized, as a potentiality yet to be actualized, as an empty and so creative space *far* more

radical and free than the most patriotic or religiously right among us have dared imagine?” (464). By capitalizing on extending human compassion, liminal nones are aiding in envisioning a universal language in the United States that deconstructs religious categories and provides neutral, moral grounding to religiously and politically divided groups.

Views on Morality

Philosophers have long debated ethics in attempts to understand the problems of human morality, but it is the goal of the anthropologist to record these views, and not to challenge them. Many participants I interviewed defined morality as a relative concept—one constructed through subjective experience. Many participants went on to state they felt certain things were morally wrong, like infringing on the happiness of others, but they often struggled in attempting to clarify as to why they felt this way. As there is decidedly no *universal* morality, the social fabric of the American religious and political landscapes are becoming more liberalized as nones increase. Shweder and Menon (2014) call for scholarly investigation into ‘moral anthropology.’ They state that anthropologists have taken a recent returning interest to the social phenomenon behind establishing moral foundations. Anthropologist Leslie Bedo states that when discussing moral anthropology, the looming concept of *ought* is present, meaning that presented conduct is considered right or wrong due to the known social consequences of the conduct thereafter (cited in Shweder and Menon 2014; *see* Sidgwick 1884). One participant was conscientious of this notion of ought stating “we learn by doing and dealing with the consequences dealt by

others.” Knowing the social consequences of an action cannot help but influence how one views the morality of that action if rules are already implemented.

In relaying their knowledge of morality through subjective experience, many of the liminal nones at Bonnaroo who I interviewed stressed the importance of respecting diversity amongst humanity in regard to everyone’s own unique wants and needs. In regard to the subjectivity of morality, Habermas et al. (2010) posits that ethical questions are “situated at the individual level and geared to the telos of each individual’s life” (40). One participant expressed this same sentiment stating, “I think morality is more of a circumstantial thing where the right decision could be wrong. It’s all based off of experience.” The theme of ‘learning from experience’ resonated strongly through ten out of sixteen participants’ responses when asked as to what shaped their moral understandings. Liminal nones retain a type of moral relativism that is unlike gross acceptance of all peoples’ actions. Instead, they extend understanding and compassion towards others actions to learn from them—noting the inextricable diversity of moral justifications.

In contrast to moral views of religious believers, liminal nones do not identify with a dogmatic belief. This is not to say that liminal nones do not have beliefs, but rather they do not attribute a *label* to their beliefs. Many religious people do hold similar morals as liminal nones, such as The Golden Rule and extending compassion towards humanity. However, many organized religions also condone notions of ‘Chosen People’, heretics, blasphemers, and glorified suffering, which are in direct opposition to the morals of liminal nones. For example, several participants I interviewed mentioned disagreement

with homophobic teachings that were presented as moral law to them by their religious leaders. By choosing not to identify with morals of organized religion, liminal nones are not subscribing to a set of values that are deemed moral by either a doctrine or deity. Philosophically speaking, perhaps the greatest moral principle of organized religion that liminal nones at Bonnaroo found to problematic was the problem of the evil; the overwhelming majority of them expressed disgust in the amount of suffering in the world and confusion as to why it exists. Interestingly enough, many participants specifically mentioned agreeing with the concept of karma, but instead of interpreting those who suffer as deserving their suffering, they interpreted those who suffer as deserving compassion and understanding for whatever actions created their unfortunate state. Thus, a signature component to liminal nones' stance on morality is that it embraces an experiential approach to guide their understandings, unlike organized religions that refer to doctrine or deity for moral guidance.

Of the liminal nones I interviewed at Bonnaroo, it was overwhelmingly their moral position that all people deserve happiness, and that we should attempt to help fellow humanity, especially those in need. Having documented values in folk psychology, Bedo states that three general areas of value tend to be prevalent in moral anthropology: “autonomy (freedom of choice, freedom from harm, equality), community (duty, hierarchy, interdependency, loyalty, sacrifice), and divinity (purity, sanctity, cleanliness, sacred order)” (Shweder and Menon 2014: 358). These general categories reflect what most people value, regardless of religious or secular stance (Shweder and Menon 2014). When I questioned participants about what they valued, many echoed Bedo's category of

community stating relationships, family, and friends. Other liminal nones I interviewed more broadly stated they valued quite literally everything—people, nature, animals, the Earth itself, etc. Some stated they valued concepts like honesty and trust, and others stated human connection. However, these values are probably not uncommon for people to hold regardless of religious stance. Therefore, a large part of liminal nones' morality can be attributed to a reverence for society and shared humanity, which gives them an advantage of holding an inherently neutral position with which to create a standard of human moral understanding in the United States. By stressing human connection, religious and secular people alike can reach common ground and diffuse potential negative sentiments held toward each other.

As stated earlier, most liminal nones at Bonnaroo believed that if one commits good acts, then good will be returned to him or her in some way. In fact, overwhelmingly, the vast majority of the participants I interviewed specifically mentioned the concept of love as being important to their lives and extending that love to humanity and beyond. The concept of love is one that all humans can identify with on some level, regardless of religious stance, and extending human compassion would be central to creating a common, moral understanding. One of my participants stressed the belief that “it should be innate to love things.” When discussing their motivations and futures, many participants reflected this extension of love by expressing interest in careers regarding public health, sustainability, pharmacology, and water accessibility. Overwhelmingly, it is evident by liminal nones' moral stances on extending love and their deterrence from

antitheist sentiments that they have the capability to create solidarity and community, and to become an acknowledged population in American religion and politics.

According to Pew (2014), fifty-three percent of Americans believe it is necessary to believe in God to be moral. Even many people who claim to be atheist or agnostic describe their understanding of the world in a religious framework because the institution has become enmeshed in American culture. Despite this, many American atheists and agnostics live lives that the majority of Christians would consider ‘moral’, but God simply is not in the equation for them. Liminal nones conceive of morality outside of both religious and secular traditions, alike. Or rather, their conceptions forge a more neutral, moral ground for which religion and secularism were thought to be at odds in American society. By extending human compassion, liminal nones are formulating the basis for a humanitarian, neutral language in regard to morals in the United States.

Varieties of Spiritual Expression

Liminal nones express their beliefs in sundry ways, yet they all are lent to a transcendental ‘something’ beyond merely themselves. Albanese (2001) discusses Americans’ exploration into metaphysical and new age spirituality in the past couple of decades and a focus on nature, consciousness, the self, the higher self, the Universe, etc. Liminal nones do not operate in terms that are binary (i.e. religion and secularism); rather, Ammerman (2013) states they construct their spirituality in regard to four general areas: (1) personal deities, (2) naturalistic forms of transcendence, (3) ethical everyday compassion, and (4) general ‘spiritual but not religious.’ Ethical everyday compassion is perhaps most closely associated with how liminal nones construct their morality,

however, they construct their spirituality in terms of the other categories as well.

Partridge (2008) expresses the importance of understanding liminal nones' traditions stating, "Whether one considers the increasing significance of the body, the importance of virtual communities and the symbolic, or the sacralization of popular culture, just as we are witnessing a revolution in the way twenty-first-century religion/spirituality is lived, so there will need to be a revolution in the way it is studied and understood" (13). It is important to discuss some of the ways liminal nones express their spiritual beliefs, even if somewhat resulting in an ineffable understanding. As liminal nones at Bonnaroo expressed a general awe-inspiring reverence for the world and humanity at large, this lends optimism to creating mutual moral understandings regardless of religious stance.

As stated previously, many liminal nones still believe in God. This reflects Ammerman's (2013) first category, personal deities. However, liminal nones' perceptions of God are different than the standard Christian concept of such, or as defined by any other organized religion. One participant echoed Albanese's (2001) research regarding creative expression and God stating, "I believe in a higher power. I just don't assign any name, or gender, or sex characteristics to it—the 'Universe is God' kind of thing." Another participant extended more of a metaphorical understanding stating, "I praise the same idols as Jesus, but here on Earth now in a way." Ammerman (2003) states most liminal nones construct a theistic spirituality because the religious institutions in which they were generally raised helped establish habits, routines, and practices surrounding a Christian monotheistic worldview. Though many liminal nones express a belief in God,

their alternative understandings demonstrate they are still not limiting themselves to a common or standard definition.

Reflecting Ammerman's (2013) second spiritual category (naturalistic forms of transcendence), several participants described a belief in the possibility of what one participant described as "an upper level we can't really pierce." According to Albanese (2001), some liminal nones describe what is known as the "m-field (morphogenetic field)", which is essentially the greater ineffable web of light, patterns, waves, energy, particles, matter, consciousness, and the like that comprise and intrinsically connect every living and non-living thing in the universe. Albanese (2001) goes on to state that many liminal nones believe this subatomic information web is operating through time-space, and as moving toward wholeness. While some participants stated belief in an ineffable energy, many others expressed awe and appreciation over the mere state of being and existence. And as many liminal nones express the belief that all things are intrinsically connected in this way (Albanese 2001), this could result in a shift toward more conscientious and humanitarian attitudes in the United States.

Albanese (2001) states liminal nones often express the belief in positive thought and that by altering one's internal harmony, their physical reality can be altered as well. Several participants expressed importance of the mind in regard to will power, "harmonizing the self," positive thinking, and knowing through the mind, thus manifesting *their own* desired reality into existence (Albanese 2001). One participant attempted to express his/her knowledge of an ineffable something stating, "I feel like I *know* there is something out there," and another one stated, "sometimes coincidence

seems too strong.” With reflection and humility, one participant asserted, “I accept the fact that I don’t really know if anything is out there, but I think there might be something.” Many liminal nones openly admit they do not have the answers, and nor does anyone else, but they also do not agree with the structure of organized religion in regard to lifestyle decisions and church attendance.

Describing the Ineffable

In many ways, liminal nones are adapting religion to new social circumstances in the United States. Dworkin states even those who do not believe in God relay understandings of a transcendental something that are no less profound (cited in Thomson-Devereaux 2013). One participant stated optimistically, “I feel that there has to be something greater. There has to be some powers in the Universe, but not necessarily a God figure.” Hopeful sentiments like “there has to be more” and “it’s not all from nowhere” kept recurring in participants’ responses while expressing their beliefs. However, many participants also found it difficult to state how or why they felt they knew something transcendental exists, other than they simply felt that way due to general life experiences. One participant expressed struggling with attempting to define something transcendental and ineffable, and the lack of a universal language of understanding stating, “I had these experiences that the English language can’t even begin to describe.” Recognizably, as Thomson-Devereaux (2013) states liminal nones are difficult to arrange in a category, or identify patterns with, due to difficulty using language in describing their views; therefore, we can only so much as rely on data providing liminal nones who retain a stable preference as opposed to those who switch

their preferences. Deterring from absolutes, one of my participants stated, “I don’t like to say I know things for sure.” Most participants were humbled by the unknown and instead inspired by future endeavors to better humanity. It is with humanitarian morals and a diversity of expression that liminal nones have the potential to create a neutral language of understanding several scholars described as potentially existing (Butler et al. 2011; Habermas et al. 2010; Thomson-Devereaux 2013).

The beliefs of liminal nones are expressed in various ways, which take endless forms because they are not defined by dogmatic principles of organized religion. Largely, they hold values that are foundationally constructed on the notion of extending compassion toward humanity, regardless of religious or secular stance. However, their liminal affiliation allows them to detach from religious or secular biases that might otherwise have stopped these groups from creating mutual understandings. As O’Connell Killen and Silk (2004) state that alternative spiritualities create innovation in society, with liminal nones presenting a refreshing humanitarian stance, they may contribute to a shift in religious and political understandings in the United States.

5. A POSTDUALISTIC, TRANSPERSONAL STANCE ON RELIGION

Liminal nones blur the lines between religion and atheism (Thomson-Devereaux 2013), and are therefore, constructing new stances in the spheres of American religion and politics. Although liminal nones are currently lacking solidarity and community, Thomson-Devereaux (2013) states, “the will to create a non-religious community is humming” (3). Thomson-Devereaux (2013) goes on to assert that without obtaining a shared language, American culture cannot engage in reinvention. Many participants I interviewed expressed the will to engage in reinvention as indicated by their liberal political views. As O’Connell Killen and Silk (2004) state, proponents of the New Spirituality movement are contributing to innovation by generating cultural creativity, and thus, new modes of thought in the United States. As liminal nones create new spiritualities, several scholars state this points towards a rising post-dualistic, transpersonal stance of religion (Thomson-Devereaux 2013; Habermas et al. 2010; Butler et al. 2011). This stance is post-dualistic in the sense that the categories of religion and secularism are not seen as opposing; what is meant by transpersonal is that this stance approaches moral understanding as transcending merely human importance. By stressing humanitarian morals and neutralizing biases, scholars state that liminal nones are opening dialogue between religious and secular people alike to create a sense of common morality in the United States.

By using religious language, believers are knowingly or unknowingly marginalizing those who do not hold beliefs inside that discourse. Likewise, proponents of antitheism are using language that ostracizes believers. Since religious peoples are the majority in the United States (Pew 2015a), if believers agree with secular views, there is not an issue, however, when believers disagree with secular views, this creates a disruption, or epistemic break in society (Butler et al. 2011). Thomson-Devereaux, Habermas and Taylor agree that in order to create a post-dualistic, transpersonal stance of religion in the United States, reason must be conceptualized in a non-Christian sense of secularization; this notion posits secular *as* neutral, interchangeably, to create mutual perspective instead of expanding the perspective of one's own community (Butler et al. 2011). Furthermore, "secularization functions less as a filter separating out the contents of traditions than as a transformer which redirects the flow of tradition" (Habermas et al. 2010: 18). Essentially, by shifting cultural paradigms and ways of thinking to more neutral terms of civil religion, this could potentially benefit Americans in reaching mutual, basic understandings. Liminal ones are creating more cohesive, humanistic, philosophical and moral understandings as free individuals due to their diversity and disassociation with a set dogma, like in organized religion; however, they lack a community to provide them with a voice in American society.

Habermas (2011) stresses that a post-secular stance is achievable by translating the ethical insights of religious traditions (cited in Butler et al. 2011). The notion of post-secular means that Americans are neither becoming more religious nor secular, but that, culturally, society is moving beyond the limitations of those terms; the 'post' now refers

to the period after which proponents of secularization theory expected the United States to become more secular, but this is not the case. By translating, Habermas means that religiously associated language needs to be molded into a new post-secular and universal language that all Americans can comprehend and access on a basic, philosophical, moral level, devoid of religious stance (Habermas et al. 2010). Habermas goes on to state that a “post-secular stance looks to religious sources of meaning and motivation as both a helpful and even indispensable ally in confronting the forces of global capitalism, while underscoring the crucial difference between faith and knowledge” (cited in Butler et al. 2011: 3). And as we must be careful not to reduce religion to the single social function of providing ethical worldviews (Habermas et al. 2010), disregarding it would be irresponsible. Taylor states it is indeed hazardous if we attempt to invoke sentiments of *antitheism*, as this would be completely overturning some peoples’ foundational and most basic views in the United States (cited in Butler et al. 2011). Similarly, Habermas et al. (2010) echoes this sentiment, stating it is dangerous to refuse to communicate with different fundamentalists. Derrida (1998) agrees, “faith and reason (as intellectual formations) are intrinsically interdependent” (quoted in Habermas et al. 2010: 45). And furthermore, to atheists and agnostics who attempt to invoke these antitheist sentiments, Taylor states that conceptualizing of religion as a problem has become a “historical relic” (cited in Butler et al. 2011). If antitheists continue to hold these negative sentiments, then mutual understandings can never be reached if there is no will to compromise. Participants at Bonnaroo shared these same notions, so as to neither completely disavow either religion or secularism. Rather than broadening philosophical divides, liminal nones

are advocating the neutral, universal language that scholars like Habermas and Taylor discuss are capable of creating in the United States.

Similarly, Taylor advocates a radical redefinition of secularism as manifesting a neutral basis of *civil* religion (cited in Butler et al. 2011). Much like Habermas's post-secular theory, Taylor's theory of civil religion does not entail state mandated religion, but rather that Americans would collectively create a common, humanitarian moral code, despite ones' religious stance. In this same vein, Dworkin (2013) advocates creating a 'right to ethical independence', where the belief in God would be irrelevant as special rights would not be fixated on a particular subject (i.e. religion). Taylor goes on to state that this redefinition can only be achieved with strong solidarity, a high degree of confidence, and mutual commitment. In this way, liminal nones have developed a new type of collective agency where they identify as free agents (cited in Butler et al. 2011). Therefore, this population could potentially seek out a way to create a cohesive community amongst the diversity of unique individuals, as the basis of solidarity is already present.

Habermas et al. (2010) states that secularism should not be defined by Christianization, and truths of faith should not be defined by judgment. Habermas et al. (2010) posit that two things must occur to combat the lack of communication between both religious and ideological fundamentalists: 1) believers accept secularism in the form of fallible science and universal egalitarian law and morality and 2) secularists not judge truths of faith. In order for this paradigm shift to occur, Americans need to focus on heightening humanitarian awareness to the violations of solidarity throughout the world –

Habermas's 'what is missing' (Habermas et al. 2010) and mobilize reason to save it from its current defeatist position in recent antitheistic science. Therefore, religious people need to realize the necessity of relating faiths, and atheists and agnostics need to diffuse antitheistic sentiments. In this way, a neutral, secular, universal language can be achieved without assimilating faith in reason, but rather redirecting the flow of traditions. It is my understanding that what Habermas describes here is what liminal nones at Bonnaroo also described. Liminal nones have the capability to bridge communication gaps between traditions as many used to be religious, but are not jaded to disregard believers.

As long as we continue to define peoples' alternative identities in terms of something that is *lacking*, there will continue to be a negative association with this population. As stated earlier, many participants interviewed at Bonnaroo believe in God, but the mere fact that they no longer (or never did) follow the dogmatic principles of the Christian religion taints their image among other Christians. Of the liminal nones who were formerly Christian, most simply did not condone of the rules imposed upon them concerning what type of lifestyle they wanted to live. Liminal nones have risen in the United States because they want to express their spirituality and live humanitarian, moral lives in a way that is not defined by the dogmas of organized religion.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Though literature regarding liminal nones is scarce, this quickly rising population is affecting change in the United States' religious and political spheres by deconstructing dualistic categories of religion, and promoting liberal, humanitarian views. In this thesis, I have attempted to analyze the history and worldviews that contextualize liminal nones' religious identities, and investigate their social impact in the United States. Furthermore, I argue that there is a potential post-secular, transpersonal religious orientation emerging in the United States on account of the humanitarian morals they expressed (Butler et al. 2011; Habermas et al. 2010; Thomson-Devereaux 2013). I conducted an ethnographic case study of liminal nones at the Bonnaroo Music and Arts Festival to provide greater insight into the backgrounds and values that shape these individuals. I explored the context of Bonnaroo so I could access a population presenting the generally young, educated, and liberal demographic of liminal nones within another liminal context. The importance of studying this population lies in the potential to open dialogues between not only religious and secular people in the United States, but all categories in between, to deconstruct opposing sentiments and create a more cohesive language of human moral understanding.

The role of the anthropologist is not to challenge the views of the participants, but to collect data on what those views are in their own words. As Shweder and Menon

(2014) state, there has been a recent trend in the academic community toward investigating moral foundations, and this thesis is a reflection of that. Anthropologists and scholars and many other disciplines are seeking to understand how liminal nones (and nones alike) construct their own narratives and how society is changing. Somewhat paradoxically as this population is rapidly rising, Pew (2015b) predicts that between 2010-2050 the world population may grow at a quick enough rate to make nones a declining part of the world's population. Though nones may soon be in overall decline due to population growth, this is still a quickly rising trend in the United States, France, England, etc. that will continue to cause change in the religious and political spheres (Pew 2015b). Therefore, it's important for anthropologists to investigate the alternative spiritualities and populations causing innovation and culture change, especially in the forefront of moral anthropology.

Instead of broadening the dualist notion that religion and secularism are opposing concepts, liminal nones are deconstructing and redefining these terms to form a neutral, universal language that all Americans can identify with. Liminal nones reconcile values of religion and secularism, and conceptualize them in a way in which these ideas *coexist*, being contradictory only to outsiders. Instead of being fixated on truth claims, liminal nones believe in the interconnectedness of all things and focus their efforts on the betterment of humanity. This quickly rising population (although lacking in solidarity) is redefining religious categories in the United States and liberalizing its political sphere, thus warranting anthropological investigation. The worldviews of liminal nones are largely based on a reverence for society (and beyond)—respecting diversity and

advocating tolerant coexistence. I would like to conduct future scholarly investigations on liminal nones, comparing various liminal festival settings. It would be interesting to conduct a long-term study to see the retention of their preferences, or if it had changed. This research was conducted in the attempt to provide greater insight as to how liminal nones construct their worldviews, and as to how this pattern is affecting American society. This thesis research will contribute to the overall understanding of the rising pattern of liminal nones in the United States, how they conceptualize of their worldviews and morality, and how the United States' religious and political landscape is changing. More generally, this thesis will contribute to literature regarding religion and morality construction. Lastly, deferring from labels of religious or secular, liminal nones possess the potential to manifest Habermas et al.'s (2010) neutral, universal language of understanding. By expressing a general reverence for society untainted by judgments of truth, liminal nones can alter the way Americans conceptualize of their values and sense of morality to create solidarity and human compassion that is missing in the religious and political spheres in the United States today.

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BIOGRAPHY

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