CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC OF SECULAR IDENTITIES: CONVERSIONS AWAY

FROM

by

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

Nature of the Problem

In 2008, Dan Barker, previously a successful evangelical preacher, published *Godless*, the account of his conversion away from Christianity and towards Atheism. Barker's partial autobiography details his departure from a Christian community and his reasoning behind the rejection of his lifelong fundamentalist[i] beliefs. William Lobdell, a journalist, also writes about his own conversion away from Catholicism in his 2009 autobiography, *Losing My Religion*. Lobdell documents the life crises that caused him to adopt a Catholic belief system, how he incorporated his religion into his career as a journalist, and ultimately the events and ideas that led him to reject Catholicism.

Lobdell's and Barker's stories represent a neglected area of study within Rhetoric: conversions away from non-contingent[ii] beliefs. While conversion studies, the study of the transformation of identities, have held the attention of scholars within many fields (sociology, anthropology, theology), few scholars have yet to distinguish *deconversions* (conversions away from non-contingent belief systems) from other kinds of conversions.

Through this project, I will examine how Lobdell and Barker describe their loss of non-contingent beliefs, the aspects of their experience they claim changed their minds, and their appeals to readers to consequently adhere to secular values. My goals are based on two moves made by these authors: 1) They both identify a religious audience. Barker claims his "real desire is that a Christian reader will finish this book and join us" (xv), and Lobdell dedicates his book to "those wounded by the church" (n. pag.). I discuss who their audiences are further in the chapters, but this statement leads me to conclude that both books were written in large part to help those with religious beliefs explicitly adhere to secular values.

My study takes its cue from Sharon Crowley's award-winning 2006 book, *Towards a Civil Discourse.* In her book she articulates the characteristics of fundamentalist belief, how it manifests itself in American culture, and how liberal forms of argumentation[iii] have failed to account for the means by which Christian fundamentalists are persuaded (faith and biblical interpretation) (3). Crowley offers rhetorical invention as a potential, but partial, remedy to the polarized and polarizing exchanges between liberals and fundamentalists. In her final chapter she argues for challenging privilege and isolation (193), constructing narratives to exemplify liberal values (197), clearly articulating liberal values (199), confirming shared values (200), exposing the contingency of fundamentalist beliefs (201), and clearly discerning ideas by disarticulating a fundamental belief from others with which it is associated (201) as avenues that might encourage fundamentalists to change their minds. Rhetorical invention as a whole, Crowley claims, accounts for a more comprehensive range of appeals than liberal argumentation:

> Rhetorical argumentation, I believe, is superior to the theory of argument inherent in liberalism because rhetoric does not depend solely on appeals to reason and evidence for its persuasive efficacy . . . . [I]t will be better in the present climate than liberal argumentation because it offers a more comprehensive range of appeals, many of which are considered to be inappropriate in liberal thought. (*Towards* 4)

To build off of Crowley's work, I claim that in order to have a greater understanding of how the conversion away from non-contingent beliefs happens, Rhetorical Studies should give more attention to the narratives of those who were convinced to reject non-contingent beliefs. The study of deconversion narratives presents scholars with tangible situations, appeals, and forms of identification that have been effective, in at least one instance (that of

the autobiographer), in persuading someone who holds non-contingent beliefs to adhere to a secular identity.

Deconversion narratives also present scholars with an opportunity to further their understanding of Rhetorical Studies in a couple of ways: 1) Deconversion narratives are documents that show how a growing number of individuals constitute their own identity, and 2) Deconversion narratives present scholars with documents that articulate how some individuals who adhere to a secular identity believe they should appeal to others. More specifically, through studying how individual atheists use their identity to persuade those they disagree with, we might see how they regard the identities of those they disagree with.

My project takes as its subject matter not the clash between liberals and Christian fundamentalists, but one aspect of the theist/atheist debate: the process of conversion away from foundational or non-contingent Christian beliefs. And while Crowley discusses the manifestations of Christian fundamentalists' belief on a cultural level, my study will analyze two individual conversion narratives—or, rather, *deconversion* narratives— in Lobdell and Barker.

I use the term *deconversion* in order to focus this analysis on the rejection or failure to adhere to non-contingent beliefs. As James Craig Holte notes in his book, *The Conversion Experience in America*, "Conversion narratives, like other narratives, are controlled conventions. A conversion is either a turning from or a turning toward" (xii). The primary reason for relying on this term is that a deconversion to a secular identity is a rejection of old beliefs, or a turning from, more so than an adherence to new beliefs or a turning toward. Atheism does not represent an organized belief system like Christianity does. Presumably, those who adhere to non-contingent beliefs already use liberal forms of argumentation, require physical evidence to be convinced, and are logically consistent *regarding particular*

beliefs, so it is problematic to say deconversion narratives articulate a conversion toward rational thinking, or any other comprehensive paradigm. Also, while an individual's reasons for converting away from religious belief may vary, it stands to reason that deconverts are no longer Christians because they found something unfulfilling, unconvincing, or inaccurate about Christian tenets.

  Neuroscientist and renowned atheist, Sam Harris, articulates how atheistic thought does not form a unified belief system:

> Atheism has no content. To be an atheist is like being a non-astrologer. No one gets taught to be a non-astrologer. You just don't get convinced by astrology . . . . Atheism is not a belief system. It is the rejection of a certain style of dogma, that is the dogmas of religion. So every Christian is an Atheist with respect to Islam. They're just not convinced by the claim that the Koran is the perfect word of the creator. (n.pag.)

If atheism has no content, then it is difficult to examine what deconverts are converting towards. However, it is explicit what these individuals are converting *away from*: non-contingent Christian beliefs. And so it is here where my thesis focuses its attention: the process of Lobdell's and Barker's deconversion away from non-contingent Christian beliefs and the implications of that process for each author's identity, or how he constitutes himself to his audience. My goal is to better understand the processes of how one-time Christians say they were persuaded to abandon non-contingent beliefs and how they use their experience to appeal to other religious individuals.

  Focusing on deconversion narratives allows scholars of rhetoric to see how individuals reconstitute their identity and how authors such as Lobdell and Barker attempt to appeal to a religious audience. I hope Rhetorical Studies, through this analysis, will

understand adherence to foundational, non-contingent beliefs and conversions away from those beliefs a little more intimately. Furthermore, it is my hope that rhetorical studies will benefit in understanding how people choose to identify themselves in opposition to a certain set of beliefs.

Choice of Texts

I chose William Lobdell's and Dan Barker's texts for my study because their backgrounds offer scholars different and varied examples of deconversions. Conversions, in general, are very specific to the scenes and situations in which they occur. Given individuals' infinitely varied identities, the conversions of those identities will be equally varied. While I assume there will also be similarities in Lobdell's and Barker's deconversions, it is important to understand deconversions from multiple perspectives. It is possible that there may be dissimilar, yet equally effective means of deconversion. Lobdell's and Barker's experiences provide extremely disparate situational and individual accounts of deconversion.

Lobdell's career as a journalist offers a chance to examine a deconversion of an individual who employs liberal forms of argumentation in his everyday job. The task of building a story out of testimony and tangible evidence is specific to Lobdell's professional obligations, and it will be beneficial to see how he describes how his religious beliefs influenced his career as a journalist throughout his deconversion.

Barker's career is in sharp contrast to that of Lobdell's in that Barker was raised as an evangelical Christian and became an ordained preacher at a young age. He was a prominent Christian speaker in California, and he served as an associate pastor at three California churches. Barker is also an accomplished musician. He composed, produced, and performed many Christian children's songs, and Barker's royalties from those songs, which he claims he still receives to this day, are evidence of his deep-rooted presence as an authority figure in

the Christian community. Barker not only adhered to foundational, non-contingent beliefs, but he actively reinforced them in the lives of other believers.

Both Lobdell and Barker represent individuals who adhered to non-contingent, faith claims but eventually rejected them. I hypothesize that if we study widely varied experiences of deconversion, then the potential generalizations we draw from those experiences will be more notable for understanding deconversions specifically, and by default, scholars will have a more intricate understanding, in general, of conversion, identity, and the motivation of individuals.

Research Questions

The failure of liberalism to account for the kinds of appeals inherent in fundamentalist religious beliefs encouraged scholars, like Crowley, to reevaluate what appeals are available to fundamentalists. Crowley concludes *Toward a Civil Discourse* by offering alternative appeals to persuade fundamentalists (listed earlier) to liberal argumentation. This study of deconversion narratives differs from Crowley's a bit. Crowley was interested in describing how apocalypticism, a form of Christian fundamentalism, manifested itself in American culture and in potential means of persuading fundamentalists who are not convinced by liberal forms of argumentation. However, I am interested in examining specific instances in which someone was convinced to lose his religious beliefs and why. While Barker considers himself to have been a Christian fundamentalist, Lobdell was much more moderate in his religious belief.

Rhetorically analyzing these two deconversion accounts simultaneously shows what persuaded Lobdell and Barker to adhere to a secular identity. This study will also analyze what strategies these two previously religious insiders think will appeal to readers, who hold beliefs similar to Lobdell's and Barker's old beliefs. Ultimately, this study will allow me to

articulate areas for future research regarding identity constitution. It is my hope that this study shows recent exigencies that have led a growing number of people to identify themselves with a label that, as Harris noted, has little to no content.

My research questions are:

1)   How do Lobdell and Barker now describe their old identities as theists and their new identities as atheists?

2)   Within their autobiographies, how do Lobdell and Barker constitute their deconversions, the negotiation between old and new beliefs, to their readers?

3)   How do Lobdell and Barker attempt to identify with their audiences?

4)   What implications do these texts have for rhetorical scholars and their understanding of conversions away from foundational, non-contingent paradigms?

Burkean Terms

Religious conversion is simultaneously a reconstruction of personal beliefs and a reconstruction of personal identity. While this project does not deal with the conversion of Biblical characters, I concur with Dana Anderson that if we are to examine conversion of any form, then "you're going to need Damascus as a cardinal point" (*Identity's Strategy* 1). The conversion of Saul to Paul is a microcosm of the parallel reconstruction of identity and beliefs, in that Paul's nominal change is symbolic of his change in beliefs. While the two reconstitutive projects do not determine one another exhaustively, they do have tangible and immediate effects on one another. It is impossible to have a conversion of ideologic beliefs without a corresponding conversion of identity. Therefore, a study of identity is imperative in understanding religious conversions and deconversions.

More than any other modern rhetorical theorist, Kenneth Burke explored the implications of the term *identity* and examined, in a sophisticated way, the nature of identity constitution. Two of Burke's works, *Attitudes Toward History* (1937) and *A Grammar of Motives* (1945), provide especially important discussions of identity, so I draw primarily upon them to construct the theoretical framework for my study of Dan Barker's and William Lobdell's deconversion narratives. In this section I review Burke's use of the terms *identity*, *identification*, *constitution*, and *substance*. I also treat his term *constitution* as what Burke calls a "representative anecdote" for individual identity and how it is constituted. Ultimately this will provide me a lens through which to analyze (1) the language Barker and Lobdell use as an expression of their identity throughout their deconversion, (2) the ways they use that identity in order to persuade others to adopt similar worldviews regarding the supernatural, and (3) the implications of their explicit claims about themselves.

Identity Studies

Any conversation regarding identification between a speaker and audience must pay respect to the history of identity studies of the last few decades. The validity of identity studies was criticized heavily for falling into essentialism and for positing personal experience as a reliable form of knowledge. The fact that the concept of identity has been controversial is supported by Paula Moya in *Reclaiming Identity*, a collection of essays she edited with Michael Hames-Garcia and published in 2000.

> "Identity" remains one of the most . . . hotly disputed . . . topics in literary and cultural studies. For nearly two decades, it has been a central focus of debate for psychoanalytic, poststructuralist, and cultural material criticism . . . . Oddly enough, much of what has been written about identity during this period seeks to delegitimate, and in some cases eliminate, the concept itself by

revealing its ontological, epistemological, and political limitations. (Paula

M.L. Moya, *Reclaiming Identity* 1-2)

Identity Studies within the U.S. began to garner a great deal of attention back in the 1970's

when marginalized groups began arguing for greater civil rights (Hesford xxv). These

minorities (The Black Power movement, various women's movements, gay and lesbian

movements) were being denied civil rights afforded to others on the grounds of their identity.

Since large groups of people were arguing for similar rights together, it was easy to label a

group's identity with a broad stroke, such as race or gender.

However, the French Poststructuralist movement is credited, by no small number of

scholars, for developing the most damning critiques of the concept of identity. According to

identity scholars Paula M.L. Moya (*Reclaiming Identity*) and Dana Anderson (*Identity's

Strategy*)*,* adherents to French Poststructuralism are the primary critics of identity. Moya

claims, in her introduction to *Reclaiming Identity*, that Poststructuralist theory led cultural

theorists in the 1980s and 1990s to fallaciously apply a linguistic concept to all knowledge

and meaning. Moya claims theorists extracted this linguistic concept and used it to enervate

the concept of identity. "French poststructuralism . . . has provided crucial theoretical support

to scholars attempting to dismantle the concept of identity" (*Reclaiming* 2). A few pages later

she claims:

The centrality of French poststructuralism for postmodernist critiques of the

concept of identity is exemplified by the way deconstruction has been applied

in social and cultural theory . . . .The deconstructionist thesis about the

arbitrariness and indeed indeterminancy of linguistic reference led many U.S.

literary theorists and cultural critics to understand concepts like experience

and identity . . . as similarly indeterminate and hence epistemically unreliable. (*Reclaiming* 5)

Similarly, in his 2007 book, *Identity's Strategy*, Anderson cites "the general theoretical antagonism toward the term [identity] that characterizes the past three decades of French-inspired poststructuralism" as the reason Burke's extended work on identity has not received the attention it deserves (*Identity's* 21).

Applying deconstruction to the concepts of experience and identity, as poststructuralists do, renders meaning as relative and knowledge as indeterminate and subjective. Poststructuralists claim that since meaning only exists through relative and sometimes contradicting means of signification (language), the knowledge achieved through that means could not be objective. Moya argues that, within a poststructuralist view of identity, identity is rendered as "merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse" (*Reclaiming* 6). If identity and experience are nothing more than linguistic constructions, then they become mystifying—dangerously so for poststructuralists. "In this view, to speak of identities as 'real' is to naturalize them and to disguise the structures of power involved in their production and maintenance" (*Reclaiming* 6).

The dangers of essentialism, the relative nature of experience, the indeterminacy of meaning, and the subjectivity of knowledge have led many postmodern critics to argue for the abandonment of identity as a valid concept. The poststructuralist critique of identity leads one to question how to acknowledge a dilemma such as racism. If Identity is a hollow concept, then how is it possible to evoke change within a situation in which violence and prejudice occur because of how an individual is identified by others and because of how an individual identifies themselves?

Satya P. Mohanty, Linda Martin Alcoff, Moya, and other scholars have made numerous efforts, starting in the early 1990s, to posit a Postpositivist Realist Theory of identity that answers the poststructuralist critiques. Moya summarizes hers and other scholars' main motivation for offering Postpositivist Realism as a solution in her claim that "the prevailing theories of identity lack the intellectual resources to distinguish between different kinds of identities" (*Reclaiming* 7). The solution Postpositivist Realists offer is to situate identity locally, in an effort to contextualize an individual's identity with as much nuance as possible. By contextualizing identity, essentialism is easy to avoid, and identity is also viewed as something that is real *and* constructed. Furthermore, contextualizing an individual's or a group's identity allows them to make claims about themselves objectively, but allows those individuals and groups to refrain from making their experience absolute for everyone.

There have been other significant contributions to the knowledge of how identities might gain added meanings, particularly within Kevin J. Porter's 2006 book *Meaning, Language, and Time*. It should be noted that Porter does not deal explicitly with identity, but instead he is largely concerned with the concept of *meaning* and how it has not been given ample attention. Specifically, in order to address the problem of infinite meanings within language, which reads as a kind of relativism, Porter claims that because a text or term can have meanings added to it, or in the case of this thesis, because an identity is not complete, does not render said text, term, or identity as lacking:

> The Meaning of an utterance may always be unfinished, in the sense that more
>
> meanings could be added to it, but that doesn't imply that the Meaning is
>
> incomplete or has a lack. . . . *There is no "infinity of language," if one thinks*

> *of language in terms of actual utterances and texts, and there is no infinity of*
>
> *meaning either.* (*Meaning* 251-252)

While Porter is concerned mostly with meaning, this passage also seems to deal with much of what poststructuralists found problematic with discussions of identity in regards to the indeterminancy of language, such as when he claims there is no infinity of language. In his treatment of meaning, Porter's seems to make similar recommendations as the postpositivist realists, situating identity contextually (*actual utterances and texts*) and viewing language as unfinished, rather than incomplete or lacking.

In short, Porter deals with many problems of meaning, a few of which I have mentioned as problems poststructuralists have had with the concept of identity, by offering a consequentialist theory of meaning, which is to say that "the meaning of a sign is its consequences" (52). To say that a meaning of a sign is its consequences forces scholars to consider the immediate events around an utterance or text—that is, to understand a sign contextually. Again, this seems to solve much of the problems surrounding the indeterminacy of language.

Porter, Moya, Mohanty, and Anderson offer ways of considering the identity individuals adhere to, or the meanings they give their identities, that build on the useful poststructuralist critiques of the past. Furthermore, they enable rhetorical scholars to continue to engage in identity studies without the term *identity* becoming trite or no longer useful. Finally, they all seem to embrace practical methods of employing the concept of identity to better understand others, methods that do not appear overly incoherent or indeterminate.

Constitutions and Substance

Burke uses the term *substance* to describe the make up of an individual's identity. In *A Grammar of Motives* Burke claims that "etymologically 'substance' is a scenic word" and

that "a person's or a thing's sub-stance would be something that stands beneath or supports the person or thing" (*Grammar* 22). When Burke says substance is a "scenic" word, he means to say that it is contextual, revealing information about a particular situation; one's substance cannot exist outside of a specific cultural context. Burke uses *substance* to refer to the context in which individuals act and find their motivation. However, since context often prescribes motivation (i.e., if you enter a restaurant, the context will almost always require you to serve or be served), substance refers not only to context, but also to one's motivation. Substance becomes both external (describing the situation) and internal (the motives one accepts as his or her own within a situation). One's substance actively creates identity, in that substance is the collective principles or ideas that stand beneath the individual, but those ideas are also part of the external environment. It would be fair, I think, to say that substance both creates identity and *is* identity.

Burke's writings are, collectively, a study of individual identity (*Addendum* 22), and his term *substance* is a stepping-stone to understanding his use of the term *constitution.* Burke used the concept of a *constitution* as a metaphor (or what he calls an *idealistic anecdote*) for an individual identity. Burke argues that a written constitution, such as the U.S. Constitution, serves as an " 'idealistic anecdote' in that its structure is an enactment of human wills" (*Grammar* 323). Dana Anderson explains, "The identities of individuals are 'unique constitutions' (*Grammar* 21). In likening the substance of individual identity to the substance of constitutions, Burke provocatively intimates that identities exhibit the same shifting, context dependent (or 'scenic'), and inherently strategic nature as do their documentary analogues" (*Identity's Strategy* 16).

Burke is careful to note that the substance of one's constitution (or identity) can be shaped largely through antithesis, as well. Since substance is a scenic word, in that it consists

of the environment around a constitution and the constitution itself, one's substance is determined in large part by the ideas and principles that are opposed to an individual's ideals. This is relevant to my thesis in that among the many aspects of these narratives I will be analyzing, I will be intently looking at the environment the authors describe as their own and looking for substances that might offer affirmation and/or challenges to their currently held perspectives. This kind of analysis goes beyond the purview of formal argumentation and reflects Burke's method of analyzing motives and identity.

However, if substance is influenced by environment, and environment is constantly changing, then the substance of identity, or unique constitutions, while it may be analyzed, will forever contain shifting, ambiguous elements. The ambiguity is also present because of substance's dualistic nature within constitutions: "Here again we confront the ambiguities of substance, since symbolic communication is not a merely external instrument, but also intrinsic to men as agents. Its motivational properties characterize both 'the human situation' and what men are 'in themselves' " (*Grammar* 33).

This ambiguity within a unique or individual constitution is a result of the negotiation of principles which may be contradictory, or at the very least, competing. Burke labels this concept the *necessitarian principle*. Burke is referring to this principle when he claims that constitutions are inherently agonistic: everyone has preexisting constitutions which make up his or her identity, yet, in what seems to almost be a basic human need, we offer our own identities as persuasive instruments. By necessity, the audience members will either reject the author's identity or they will reject their old identity. Furthermore:

> A constitution may, for instance, propound a set of generalized rights or duties, and all these may be considered as a grand promissory unity, a *panspermia* in which they all exist together in perfect peace and amity. Yet when, in the

> realm of the practical, a given case comes before the courts, you promptly find
>
> that this *merger* or *balance* or *equilibrium* among the Constitutional clauses
>
> becomes transformed into a *conflict* among the clauses – and to satisfy the
>
> promise contained in one clause, you must forego the promise contained in
>
> another. (*Grammar* 349)

Likewise, the constitution of a human being contains competing elements; each individual plays many roles—worker, mate, parent, child, student, citizen, etc.—that, in the "practical" realm of limited time and energy, make competing, often contradictory demands. "The so-called 'I,' Burke argues, "is merely a unique combination of partially conflicting 'corporate we's' " (*Attitudes* 264).

This necessitarian principle of constitutions is important for my study because Barker's and Lobdell's narratives are snapshots of an on-going process of self-definition. The substance of an individual, and by default his or her own identity, is a conflict of sorts, and the arguments presented in the narratives I will study, both explicitly and implicitly, should be viewed as conflicts as well. Viewing these narratives as a negotiation frames the author's appeals within his cultural situation, helping readers to view said arguments contextually, as opposed to assuming their arguments contain universal or essential meaning. Because these narratives are making universal claims (a disbelief in God throughout all reality), I think this to be a notable aspect of my lens.

Finally, defining the conversion narrative as a "constitutive act," an act which further establishes the identities of the authors to themselves while simultaneously prescribing an identity for others, allows me to study a single narrative with attention to the scene around the authors, in order to analyze how that scene might constitute their individual identities. For example, Lobdell attends meetings of support groups for those recovering from sexual abuse

inflicted by priests. These scenes serve, for Lobdell, as an impetus for his deconversion. In essence, I am employing a lens which was introduced by Burke and which has begun to receive more attention the last couple of decades, a lens which Maurice Charland calls "constitutive rhetoric" ("Constitutive"), and one which Gregory Clark later adopts to show how national landscapes can shape a group identity (*Rhetorical Landscapes* 124).

Specifically, I am interested in how each author uses his identity, his unique constitution, to persuade others to adopt his views. That is, I examine how individual constitutions (identity) are strengthened and formed by the retelling of deconversion narratives in an effort to persuade others into a collective identity (constitutive rhetoric). As I'll explore in the next section, I rely heavily on the ideas Burke develops on the process of Identification.

Identification

In *A Rhetoric of Motives,* Burke draws together his ideas on "identification," which he had previously begun in *Attitudes Toward History*, and he complicates the term by viewing them in light of his exploration into the ambiguities created by the "paradox of substance" (the external and internal nature of substance) in *A Grammar of Motives*. While Burke's *Grammar* was mostly an attempt to study the ambiguous nature of humans and why they are constantly changing, contradicting constitutions, his *Rhetoric* attempts to articulate how these ambiguities function within the field of Rhetoric and how the ambiguities effect the unification and division of groups of people. In essence, Burke is examining how individual or collective constitutions (identities) align and separate. Because of this, "Identification" often reads as Burke's ultimate term for transformation (conversion) (*Rhetoric* 11)..

The process of identification is what Burke terms "consubstantiality." This concept represents the end result of two constitutions finding a principle they agree on and becoming "substantially" one (*Rhetoric* 21). First-person constitutions, such as autobiographical conversion narratives, by necessity, rely on the process of identification with their audiences in order to persuade. However, this brings me to a notable point: Identity, especially in the form of conversion narratives, assumes an audience whom they might persuade. The conversion narrative genre exists in order that audiences might be persuaded to adopt the author's perspective or to reinforce the values an audience might already share with the author. Identity can be the most compelling argument an author presents, in that the substance of an identity and how that identity is articulated can serve as the grounds for identitification or division. The fact that identity can be so compelling leads me to articulate this thesis' governing theory of how a collective might convert towards an author's identity: the theory of constitutive rhetoric.

Furthermore, Burke is largely concerned with a kind of deconversion in the division of individuals. While Identification is the ultimate term for his *Rhetoric of Motives*, he explicitly acknowledges the ubiquity of division:

> The *Rhetoric* must lead us through the Scramble, the Wrangle of the Market
> Place, the flurries and flare-ups of the Human Barnyard, the Give and Take,
> the wavering line of pressure and counterpressure . . . the War . . . . But [the
> *Rhetoric's*] ideal culminations are more often beset by strife . . . . For one
> need not scrutinize the concept of "identification" very sharply to see, implied
> in it at every turn, its ironic counterpart: division. (*Rhetoric* 23)

Here Burke acknowledges that discussions of identification, discussions of how people can become consubstantial, imply that they are not. Burke continues, "]P]ut identification and

division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric" (*Rhetoric* 25). Here, Burke helps me place the subject of deconversions, primarily a dividing process, in the realm of rhetorical studies.

Maurice Charland, building on division and identification, relies on Burke's concepts as the foundation for his theory of constitutive rhetoric. The theory of constitutive rhetoric, developed in Charland's 1987 article,[iv] is important to rhetorical studies in that it allows scholars to examine how groups of people use discourse to align and separate themselves with and from other groups. Since individual ideologies are formed through this process of aligning and separating, then constitutive rhetoric largely focuses on ideologies and how they are formed collectively through discourse. Specifically, then, constitutive rhetoric is a discourse that attempts to articulate or name a collective identity, essentially calling the identity into being.

Charland articulates three effects of a constitutive rhetoric. First, constitutive rhetoric attempts to "interpellate" (or call into being) a collective identity. Charland describes this process of interpellation as a naming of an inchoate identity.[v] Charland claims that the elements of an identity are already present within the audience, but interpellating is the process of articulating this identity for a first time—i.e., giving the identity a name. Furthermore, the collective identity operates much like Burke's concept of "ultimate identification," in that the rhetoric a speaker uses to constitute the collective identity appears to go beyond "individual or class interests or concerns" (Charland 139).

Second, constitutive rhetoric constitutes the collective identity transhistorically. The discourse uses historical identities as an extension of present identities in order to give the collective a greater purview. A modern example of this would be how the name of The Tea

Party, a modern libertarian collective, associates the group with The Boston Tea Party in 1773. By associating themselves, at least nominally, with the historic Boston Tea Party, the modern day Tea Party is constituting themselves transhistorically. Transhistorical constitution of a collective identity represents an example of Burke's consubstantiality, in that the living identify with the dead (Charland 140). To constitute an identity transhistorically gives the identity greater meaning by identifying the collective with those who came before.

A third ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric is the illusion of freedom it gives the individual. When presented a narrative to identify with, the audience is given the impression that they have the power to choose and act within an identity. However, the narrative they are encouraged to identify with actually constrains the ways in which individuals might act. Within any identity there are implicit instructions for how the individual is supposed to act. So even while the appearance of freedom might persuade a collective to identify, their actions are limited within the identity they adhere to.

But Charland claims that using one's own identity in order to constitute a collective identity presents a bit of a conundrum since "attempts to elucidate ideological or identity forming discourses as persuasive are trapped in a contradiction: persuasive discourse requires a subject-as-audience who is already constituted with an identity and within an ideology" ("Constitutive Rhetoric"134).

Burke's theory of identification and Charland's subsequent theory of constitutive rhetoric, then, offer a lens through which to view how Barker and Lobdell attempt to build their own identity, presumably as some kind of authority on the subject of religious beliefs. The process of identification offers yet another reason why deconversion narratives need more attention: it is impossible to separate identity or identification from the process of

communication, and it is especially difficult to separate it from the study of argumentative appeals made in the form of a narrative. Burke made this claim, saying "there is no chance of our keeping apart the meanings of persuasion, identification ('consubstantiality') and communication (the nature of rhetoric as 'addressed')" (*Rhetoric* 46).

The inability to separate these Burkean concepts may initially appear as a limitation to our ability to understand one another. However, I would like to emphasize that the ideas Burke puts forth allow us to understand each other more intimately, in the sense that we have begun to acknowledge the complex and fluid nature of our identities. Understanding "identity" in a positivist manner is no longer a fallacy that we chase, but instead, a lifelong struggle we are happy to engage in, or an ideal to hold, even though it will never be fully realized. The study of the deconversion narratives, and the identities they describe, will hopefully improve our quality of life incrementally, bit by bit, as we understand a little more about how identities convert away from non-contingent beliefs.

Chapter Outline

Chapter 1: Introduction and Literature Review

In this section, I credit Sharon Crowley's monograph *Toward a Civil Discourse* as the impetus for this project. The introduction explains my choice of William Lobdell's *Losing My Religion* and Dan Barker's *Godless* as the texts I will examine for my project. I also use this section to articulate Kenneth Burke's treatment of *identity* and his use of *constitutions* as the theoretical lens for my project. Finally, I include a short survey of the field of Identity Studies.

Chapter 2: The Failure of a Textbook Constitutive Rhetoric: Dan Barker's *Godless*

I analyze Barker's description of why he chose to adhere to a *freethinking* identity, why he claims he rejected his religious beliefs, and I argue he fails to appeal to an audience

of religious fundamentalists, whom he attempts to target as his audience. Ultimately, I argue that Barker's text represents a failed constitutive rhetoric, and his failures are a helpful reminder of how necessary Burke's concept of identification is to any attempt to constitute a collective identity.

Chapter 3: Identity Constitution of an Unnamed Non-Believer: William Lobdell's
Losing My Religion

In this chapter I analyze how Lobdell successfully identifies with religious moderates by employing a compassionate tone when he considers his experience as a Catholic and as a journalist. Lobdell attempts to constitute a secular collective, but I argue he does so without fulfilling the three ideological effects articulated within Maurice Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric. Ultimately, I argue that this forces us to consider other ways in which collectives might be constituted.

Conclusions

In the conclusion, I argue that Lobdell and Barker ask rhetorical scholars to 1) consider additional ways that a collective might be constituted, and 2) consider further how conversions away from religious beliefs towards identities that do not necessarily have a great deal of content, such as *atheism*, are ultimately a microcosm of how people are beginning to identify themselves in opposition to others.[vi] It is my contention that deconversions are ultimately a negotiation of secular values and non-contingent values. If we understand how individuals are, increasingly, identifying themselves by saying what they are not, without *necessarily* implying what they are, then we may have found an under researched method of how individuals constitute their identity. Furthermore, deconversions might ultimately serve as a microcosm of how conflicts happen, not only within individuals, but *between* individuals with disparate values.

Chapter 2: The Failure of a Textbook Constitutive Rhetoric: Dan Barker's *Godless*

In his book, *Godless*, Dan Barker claims to attempt to convert Christian fundamentalists to an atheistic or "free-thought" identity. Though Barker includes his personal conversion narrative and other autobiographical content, he relies largely on formal reasoning and liberal forms of argumentation to accomplish this goal. Barker's book contains a great deal of argumentation criticizing religious belief, and is bookended with his deconversion narrative at the beginning and his current status as an atheist at the end. Attempts to identify with Christian fundamentalists are rare. Barker uses an aggressive and arrogant tone to criticize religious thought. As Barker aggressively argues against religious belief, he exhibits the three ideological effects of Maurice Charland's constitutive rhetoric (interpellating an audience, constituting the collective audience transhistorically, and presenting them with the illusion of freedom to choose the identity). Although Barker's *appears* to fulfill the three ideological effects of Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric, he ultimately fails to make substantive attempts to identify with his audience. And since Kenneth Burke's concept of identification is fundamental to Charland's theory, I argue Barker's attempt to convert religious fundamentalists into a secular collective falls short of Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric.

Barker, a former pastor, notes early on that he has, paradoxically, become evangelical about his atheist beliefs. After deconverting over a five-year period in his thirties, Barker has gone on to become the President of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. He frequently engages in debates with theists and religious leaders across the country. It is fair to say that Barker has become a kind of activist, fighting to deconvert the religious to a secular identity. In speaking about his reason for writing *Godless,* Barker claims in his introduction that his "real desire is that a Christian reader will finish this book and join us" (xv). But Barker's

extended use of formal reasoning and liberal forms of argumentation would likely appeal *more* to his own "freethinking" community than to the Christian fundamentalist community. I discuss this point at greater length later, but I argue Barker's book serves to increase his status within the secular community more so than to convert Christian fundamentalists. I argue that Barker's failure to identify with religious fundamentalists ultimately distances the audience he claims to be seeking to deconvert.

Second, I argue that his own experience as he presents it in the book contrasts starkly to how he expects others to convert. Furthermore, he fails to recognize the characteristics in his own religious experience that ultimately helped him identify with secular belief. Barker ultimately fails to acknowledge the fact that his environment and nature constituted him in a way that helped him identify with secular beliefs. This failure ultimately leads him to use appeals (formal logic) that would likely be unsuccessful in identifying with fundamentalists.[vii]

In the final section, I analyze how Barker's ideal of *freethought* appears to create Charland's third ideological effect: the illusion of the freedom to choose an identity and certain beliefs. In creating such an illusion, Barker turns a blind eye to the seemingly endless list of cultural experiences that shape an individual's beliefs. What at first seems to be a synonym for "atheist," "freethinker" also becomes a collective title that posits the process of thinking as non-contingent: neutral logic that is able to operate in isolation, detached from any and all influences. It appears that the illusion of freedom within Barker's writing contributes to his failure to identify with religious audiences and likely distances them, since the illusion of freedom allows him a kind of arrogance. Since Barker is a "freethinker" the illusion of freedom explicitly paints religious audiences as limited thinkers, who embrace ignorance.[viii]

At first glance, Barker presents rhetorical scholars with a nearly perfect example of what constitutive rhetoric might look like in practice. However, Barker's failure to identify with the audience he *claims* to be speaking to ultimately undermines his appeals and renders his writing accessible mostly to those who already agree with him. Barker also fails to establish any kind of a common ground with his religious readers. Barker's failures are important in that he appears to point out how fundamentalists, secular or religious, regard others' beliefs and conversions in general. Barker's appeals to establish a freethinking collective represent a fallacy regarding belief and how it is changed: the fallacy that logic is a construct that can be learned and mimicked in isolation from cultural and personal experience. I argue this fallacy of Barker's is relevant to constitutive rhetoric in that it serves, in regards to Barker's appeals to religious readers, as an example of a failed constitutive rhetoric.

Naming Both Sides, Talking to No Sides

In his introduction, Barker states that his real desire is that a religious individual would read *Godless* and join a free thinking society. At first glance, this makes sense. Barker was once a devout evangelical pastor. Much of his time and energy went towards converting those who were not Christians. Barker himself testifies to his evangelical nature:

> I was raised in the church, but at the age of 15 I dedicated my life to Jesus Christ. I accepted a calling of God on my life to be a minister, to be an evangelist, and at that age I went out and started sharing. I went to the mountains and jungles of Mexico to share my faith for years. I traveled the United States, standing in parks and on street corners, telling people about Jesus' love. A 15-year-old evangelist. (xiv)

It stands to reason that his atheist identity would still harbor the desire to convert those whom he thought were lost, so to speak.

However, there are clear signs within the first few pages that Barker is writing to audiences other than religious fundamentalists. This is relevant to constitutive rhetoric because Barker serves as an example of an author who fails to understand the "textuality" or the "constitution" of his audience. In this section, I show *how* Barker fails to understand his audiences, and in the next section, I show the ramifications of that failure.

The book is called *Godless*, which would likely appeal to secular individuals more than it might religious individuals, who, presumably, would not easily identify with a title that openly disagrees with their most intimate ideal. The subtitle, "How an Evangelical Preacher Became *One of America's Leading Atheists*" (italics added), which further alienates his supposed audience, seems self-serving in that it appears to do what much of the rest of the book does: position Barker as a leader in the atheist community. I'll explain more on this later, but much of the book is devoted to Barker's accomplishments as an atheist, suggesting that he is writing to atheists rather than believers and that his motive is self-promotion rather than deconversion.

Barker's alienation of his intended audience continues in the foreword, written by Richard Dawkins. If Barker is speaking to Christian fundamentalists, this is surely a curious way of appealing to them within the front matter. Dawkins is a renowned evolutionary biologist and atheist, the author of *The God Delusion* and a prominent critic of religion. Dawkins very first words—"It isn't difficult to work out that religious fundamentalists are deluded" (ix)—give Christian fundamentalists ample reason to close the book. It is easy to understand how being called "deluded" within the first sentence might cause religious

readers to feel disrespected and misunderstood. This foreword alone provides evidence that would justify labeling Barker's attempts to convert religious audiences as a failure.

Barker clearly identifies part of his audience in his "Introduction," where he hopes "*Godless* will be helpful to atheists and agnostics who are looking for ways to talk with religious friends and relatives" (xv). Again, Barker's claim to be writing primarily to the religious seems spurious at worst and incomplete at best. It is easy to see how Barker might be speaking to atheists and agnostics who are interested in argumentation regarding the veracity of religious beliefs. However, his book fails to help atheists "talk with religious friends and relatives" for the same reasons Barker fails to convert religious fundamentalists: there are few, if any, signs of an attempt to identify with religious fundamentalists. There is no expression of common values, no expression of respect for a community he was once intimately a part of, and no affection for the role religious belief once played in his life.

The front matter as a whole comes across as self-serving. The presence of Dawkins gives Barker credibility, but only within atheist communities. Furthermore, Barker's book features favorable reviews from Michael Shermer,[ix] Christopher Hitchens,[x] and Julia Sweeney,[xi] among others. The names of these individuals are, I claim, more recognizable to atheists or agnostics who are familiar with literature that argues god does not exist. In fact, the vast majority of people who might recognize these names likely already have a firm atheist identity. The rhetorical effect these names have is to give Barker an authoritative standing with atheist readers.

Barker's chapters also serve largely to detail his effectiveness as an evangelical atheist. In Chapter 1 "The New Call," Barker shows how he used his zeal for Christianity to promote atheism after his deconversion: "As I write this, I have participated in 64 formal public debates. I have also done hundreds of informal debates, mainly on the radio, television

and as part of panel discussions, but when it comes to the number of timed, moderated debates before an audience, I think I now hold the record for an atheist" (68). Barker goes onto describe specific debates he has engaged in—debates that, judging by his descriptions, he almost always won. After being told by a believer that the debate between Barker and his pastor had strengthened his faith, Barker uses a play on words to portray himself as the victor by thanking the believer for the compliment and writes, "If (the believer's) faith was strengthened, then his pastor lost the debate. Faith is what you need when you don't have certainty" (69). In another debate, he was able to get a pastor to say it was moral to throw babies against rocks, based on an Old Testament passage (70). Also, he "embarrassed" a pastor in a debate by asking him how many laws of thermodynamics there were (there are 4. The pastor did not know this) (71). And again, he claims it is a good tactic to thank believers when they tell him he is going to hell because "all the great people are in hell" (77). These stories in a small way may inform atheists looking for arguments against religious fundamentalism. Largely, though, they seem to be a not so subtle way of rhetorically building his status as an atheist while also being antagonistic to religious readers. I would like to also add, on a personal note, these stories about his debates seem petty. In large part, they fail to speak to the issues atheists or theists would be concerned with if they were educating themselves on the veracity of religious belief. I contend that this failure to speak to relevant issues stands as evidence that Barker fails to constitute any kind of collective. The collective that might identify with his values (atheists), would presumably already have labeled themselves as such. And religious audiences would likely find Barker distasteful for his arrogance and insults.

My claim that Barker wrote *Godless* to strengthen his standing in the atheist or freethinking community is supported by how he ends his book as well. His third and final

collection of chapters is titled "Life is Good" and details his accomplishments as an atheist and as a leader within the Freedom From Religion Foundation. Barker details how his organization filed a lawsuit in order to block religious organizations from receiving government aid. In reference to a trip to Brazil, where he represented atheism at a conference, he recalls standing on the beach and writes, "I can now literally say I have taken atheism to the ends of the earth" (320). The majority of the chapter details Freedom from Religion Foundation's events, like picnics, protests, and his accomplishments representing the organization at conferences.

To fully understand how Barker's failures to identify with religious audiences, or irreligious audienes, it is helpful to reexamine Kenneth Burke's original concept. Burke offers us a picture of identification in his *Rhetoric of Motives*, in which ambiguity is a central concept. In identifying areas of ambiguity, there is the possibility to find common ground between seemingly disparate beliefs. At the very least, the ambiguity might serve as a starting place for a conversation about beliefs that stand in stark contrast to one another. Barker's writing leads me to believe he is not entirely forthcoming about why he is writing the book or about who his primary audience is. His appeals seem to cater to an audience that already identifies with a secular identity, and his reason for writing *Godless*, if it is not self-aggrandizing, is clearly not so religious readers will read it from cover to cover and join him.

Disparate Conversions

Charland articulately claims that certain ontological problems arise if rhetorical scholars just accept the audience of a text they're examining as given. To do so explains neither "the ontological status of those in the audience before their identification" nor "the ontological status of the persona, and the nature of identifying with it" (137). Rather, he claims that in order to understand Burke's complex, unpredictable, and messy process of

identification, scholars must consider the audience's "textuality" and "their very constitution in rhetoric as a structured articulation of signs" ("Constitutive" 137). Here Charland is claiming we attempt to identify with those constitutions we study as a means of understanding them. To understand how individuals are constituted within their own rhetoric, within their own signs, and within their own texts is to attempt to consider them contextually, as much as possible. Charland helps remind us that as we consider how Barker is trying to constitute a collective, it is equally important to understand Barker's deconversion, where he was an audience member more than he was the persona being identified with. It is important to consider Barker's textuality and his constitution in rhetoric as a religious fundamentalist. As I contrast Barker's previous religious identity and deconversion with his appeals to convert religious fundamentalists, his failures to identify with religious readers become more pronounced. Ultimately, his failure to identify with Christian conservatives is the product of Barker's inability to understand the ontological status, or the textuality, of the collective he was once a member of.

Barker's book demonstrates that he adhered to a rigid Christian fundamentalist identity. There is no greater evidence for this than when he discusses how he was intolerant of liberal Christian thought: "I was shocked by this kind of talk [that the bible might be metaphorical]. Liberal talk. The fundamentalist mindset does not allow this latitude. To the fundamentalist there is no gray area. Everything is black or white, true or false, right or wrong" (33). Eventually, out of a concern to not ostracize fellow Christians, Barker became more accepting of liberal Christian thought. While it is not drastic, this acceptance of liberal Christian thought is a kind of identification and conversion, in that Barker saw a collective he disagreed with, found a common ground (they all still accepted Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior), and accepted their differences. Barker notes that the willingness to fellowship with

liberal Christians "was the first of many little steps over the next few years" (34). I would like to note here Barker acknowledges explicitly that his deconversion was gradual, consisting of small moves like this one over a period of years. And the kinds of identifications that led him to deconvert, at least in this case, seem to lack any formal kind of logic. Instead of reason, Barker seems to be convinced by a more emotional appeal: the concern for fellowship.

Barker's intellectual interests also seem to have served as grounds for identification between his religious and secular identity. While Barker began accepting theologically liberal Christian beliefs, he eventually grew to desire an understanding of philosophers and theorists that did not espouse Christian views. This interest took a number of years for him to cultivate and came in his early thirties. Barker writes:

> I was about 30 years old when I started to have . . . early questions about
> Christianity. Not doubts, just questions . . . . So, not with any real purpose in
> mind, I began to scratch this intellectual itch . . . . This triggered what later
> became a ravenous appetite to learn, and produced a slow but steady
> migration across the theological spectrum *that took about four or five years*.
> (35) (italics added)

It is important to note that Barker's fundamentalist beliefs were not originally confronted with explicit, aggressive criticism. If he had been confronted with aggressive criticism, it is fair to wonder whether he would have embraced secular thought the way he asks his religious readers to do. However, it is also important to note how Barker presents his identification with non-Christian beliefs. He says his identity was constituted as someone who had a "ravenous appetite to learn," and this appetite, he claims, did not threaten his beliefs, but instead, he "originally thought my faith was being strengthened by this additional

information" (35). Here, Barker articulates that he valued liberal forms of argumentation, even as a fundamentalist. What could be grounds to identify with religious audiences ("We both desire to understand the world around us") is missed by Barker.

In addition to his deconversion being gradual, Barker demonstrates that it was also extremely painful for him. Even what seemed like small changes were emotionally tumultuous for him. Barker claims that his acceptance of liberal Christian thought and the "initial and timid movements away from fundamentalism were psychologically more traumatic than the intellectual flying leaps that came later" (35). Furthermore, "It was a slow, sometimes wrenching, halting, circuitous process." And finally, Barker claims, "It was like tearing my whole frame of reality to pieces, ripping to shreds the fabric of meaning and hope, betraying the values of existence. It hurt badly . . . . All my bases for thinking and values had to be restructured. Adding to that inner conflict was the outer conflict of reputation" (35). Given Barker's emotionally turbulent conversion, it seems odd that he would confront an audience that is potentially experiencing similar trauma with arrogance and aggressive criticism.

In summary, Barker presents his deconversion as: 1) Gradual, occurring over a period of about 4-5 years. He claims he was 30 when he started having questions, and he publicly declared himself as an atheist when he was 35. 2) Free from aggressive criticism. He was not initially exposed to thought that *directly* challenged his belief in god. Rather, he pursued an interest in learning that enervated his religious beliefs, but he pursued learning initially unaware that his learning was conflicting with his beliefs. 3) Traumatic. His deconversion became extremely painful. The most basic, general process of how he would come to give meaning to his life had to be restructured. Additionally, he became divorced from friends and

family because of his deconversion. His wife left him, and many within the Christian community would no longer speak to him.

I detail these aspects of Barker's deconversion in order to consider his "ontological status" as an audience member, his textuality, his constitution as a religious fundamentalist and to understand, partially, how and why he deconverted. In understanding Barker's textuality, it becomes more likely to understand how he might fail to identify with his audience, and thus it becomes clear how Barker serves as a failed constitutive rhetoric. Barker's failures ultimately help emphasize the need for identification as the foundation of any constitutive rhetoric.

If Barker's deconversion was gradual, he might have written his book in way that started a gradual conversation with his religious readers. Perhaps a narrative of the events he believes led him to accept a secular worldview would have been plenty compelling. While he offers some instances of his experiences, there is probably a great deal more to say on Barker's part. Chapter 2 details parts of his deconversion, but the previous and subsequent chapters largely deal with external events, such as what he did professionally or how others treated him. By itself, his personal experience may have been enough to interest religious readers. How he interpreted what he learned, how he viewed his experiences, how he dealt with his doubts, and how he negotiated his beliefs through the period of deconversion seems to be lacking a great many details.

Had Barker concentrated on the narrative of his experience, he may have also avoided confronting religious readers aggressively and directly. His own deconversion was spawned out of seemingly harmless desire to learn. He seems to ignore the significant fact that his learning disrupted his religious beliefs, but did so subtly, without his knowledge. A focus on narrative may have served this purpose, as a need to give an account of one's experience

appears much less threatening than the explicit desire to criticize the most meaningful beliefs another holds.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Barker openly acknowledges that his experience was one of the most traumatic of his life. It stands to reason that religious individuals reading his book might, similarly, experience emotional trauma as they endure their own deconversion. A compassionate, sympathetic tone, paired with a personal narrative that *starts* a conversation rather than ends one, might produce an opportunity for identification with religious readers. The identification could be founded between two people concerned for others' well being, at the very least. This is largely absent from Barker. Instead, Barker writes in a way that likely ostracizes and offends religious readers. He writes, "Faith is a cop-out" (39), "weak ideas require faith," "Jesus has still not returned, and never will. But who needs him?" (66), and "Religious conservatives have consistently resisted progress, preferring to maintain tradition for the sake of tradition alone, even if the tradition is bad" (67). Barker refers to religious belief as superstition, irrationality, and delusions, all things he was "healed" of (68); his Freedom from Religion Foundation has an "Emperor Has No Clothes" award that celebrates the shortcomings of religious public speakers (322), and every year his organization erects an annual Winter Solstice sign in Wisconsin to protest religious holidays (335). Finally, Barker claims that "I think across the bell curve of susceptibility to 'mysticism,' most of us fall somewhere in the middle and I fall way over to the right side. (Pun intended)" (348).

In claiming Barker failed to identify with religious *and* secular readers, the two most likely collectives he would be targeting, it is vital to be able to say why. We need only to return to Charland's quote at the beginning of this section. Barker fails to account for "the ontological status of those in the audience before their identification," and he has failed to

fully understand "the ontological status of the persona, and the nature of identifying with it":
Barker fails to correlate elements of his own experience, like the lack of direct confrontation
to his fundamentalist belief and his preexisting value of a liberal education, to with his
deconversion. Also, Barker fails to understand that a secular audience might find his
arrogance and self-adoration distasteful and irrelevant to an interest in religious belief.
Barker has chosen to ignore the above-mentioned characteristics of his own deconversion,
and he has asked religious readers to deconvert without the advantages he had: non-
threatening education and time to cultivate a desire to learn. The difference between how
Barker deconverted and how he expects his readers to deconvert creates a double standard. It
also enables Barker's aggressive, and sometimes distasteful, tone, which is likely to alienate
religious collectives and strike secular collectives as trivial.

The Illusion of Freethought

Interpellating is the first ideological effect for Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric, and
Barker does this well in the sense that he has a consistent and attractive title for the collective
he is trying to call into being: the freethinking collective. Barker's use of "freethought" or
"freethinking" as a title for a secular collective is ubiquitous throughout his book. These
terms seem to be used as a form of interpellation: the naming or calling out of his audience.
The theory of "interpellation" was originally posited by Louis Althusser in his 1971 chapter
"Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses."[xii] A subject is "interpellated," or given an
articulation of an identity s/he might assume, and this individual might assume that identity
through the speaker's appeal, which relies on Burke's process of identification (Charland
137). Althusser gives the example of calling out to someone in the street. By certain moves,
such as eye contact, moving towards someone, pointing to them, and saying "Hey You!" an
individual understands s/he is being spoken to. A speaker identifies with an audience through

rhetorical narratives that "always already" (Althusser 119) presume the constitution of the subjects. The identity of the subjects is inherent to their position as they are addressed, *but they may have not yet articulated their identity to themselves.* Thus, some may be constituted to adhere to secular values, but they may have not explicitly articulated a secular identity for themselves yet, and so the values remain inchoate.

Barker's calling out to a "freethinking" collective, his interpellation, also engenders an equally vital effect of Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric: the audience is presented with the illusion of freedom to choose their identity. An illusion of freedom exists in that any identity demands, by definition, certain beliefs or certain characteristics of its adherents. Therefore, if an audience has been constituted in such a way that they share values with another identity, there is no *real* freedom in their accepting it. Rather, the audience is fulfilling the narrative created for them. Charland writes, "The freedom of the protagonist (in a narrative) . . . is but an illusion. This illusion of freedom is the *third ideological effect* of constitutive rhetoric. Freedom is illusory because the narrative is already spoken or written . . . . [T]he subject is constrained to *follow through*, to act so as to maintain the narrative's consistency" ("Constitutive" 141).

Freethinking or freethought individuals, Barker explains, have an intellectual freedom, in the sense that they are not coerced by dogma or faith claims. He tries to articulate this through the experience of his own deconversion: "I did not lose my faith – I gave it up purposely. The motivation that drove me into the ministry – to know and speak the truth – is the same that drove me out" (40). And again, he claims he was a "free person . . . . I had made my own free choice, and no believer in the world would deny me that freedom" (46). Once his parents followed him and became atheists, Barker claims they "did their own thinking" (60). His friend Dan, whom Barker convinced to become an atheist, was a

"walking, driving advertisement for freedom of thought" (61). Barker and his second wife

had a "freethought-feminist wedding" (63). Barker's daughter is a "fourth-generation free-

thinker on her mother's side of the family. . . . The last thing a freethinking family will do is

coerce thought" (63). Barker and his second wife view their childrearing as a "freethought

education" (64). And finally, again referring to his own deconversion in which he became an

atheist, he writes, "I came to (atheism) all on my own, and that's how it should be" (43).

It is clear that through Barker's "freethought" title the illusion of freedom is created.

But it's important to understand exactly what that freedom is because as audiences

understand what freedom he is promising, they can begin to understand the limits or

constitutions of beliefs Barker ignores. Barker defines freethought as "the practice of forming

opinions about religion on the basis of reason, *without reference to authority, tradition or*

established belief" (119) (italics added). Freethinking, as Barker defines it, appears to be an

unrealistic process of thought, since any new belief would likely have been influenced by an

already "established belief," if nothing else. Barker gives the impression that freethinking is

neutral thinking. Freethought, as Barker describes it, emanates from a mind that has not been,

and will not be, influenced by "outside" interpretations. All opinions, according to Barker,

are formed on the "basis of reason," which he defines as "[a] tool of critical thought that

limits the truth of a proposition by the tests of verification . . ., repeatability . . .,

falsifiability . . ., parsimony . . ., and logic" (119). If individuals can only shape their

thinking reasonably and mimic formal logic, then, according to Barker, they can form beliefs

that more accurately reflect reality.

But the impossibility of perfectly mimicking formal logic outside of a closed system

is articulated well by Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric*,

published in 1969. They write:

However, (it) is not our intention [to give primacy to formal reasoning over argumentation]. On the contrary, we believe that formal reasoning results from a process of *simplification* which is possible only under *special conditions*, within *isolated and limited systems*. But, since there are formal proofs of recognized validity, quasi-logical arguments (arguments that mimic the structure of formal logic) derive their persuasive strength from their similarity with these well-established modes of reasoning. (193) (Italics added)

So what does this have to do with constitutive rhetoric and identity? My attention to Barker's treatment of logic and reason, and the fallacy inherent in it, relates to constitutive rhetoric in that it helps articulate the illusory freedom that Barker is promising within a freethought identity: freedom from bias. And it is most certainly an illusion. To summarize Barker's views, he seems to fall into a positivist fallacy to the degree that he fails to acknowledge how much his cultural and personal experiences might have constituted his identity; he fails to consider his own textuality, in a way. His identity creates bias, or a theoretical lens through which he evaluates claims and observations. To promise a freedom from ideology is to promise a freedom from values, and it is here that we see the illusion for what it is. For Barker, logic, reason, and freethought come across as neutral ideals, largely because of their immutability and their immunity to influence. However, Barker also speaks of them as if they are non-contingent. The problem with portraying reason as non-contingent is that, as Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca show, neither religious beliefs, nor logic, nor reason are ever in and of themselves; they are always contingent since they never operate in a closed system. By making freethought a non-contingent ideal, a self-contained logic, Barker seems to embody a kind of fundamentalism that is similar to the one he adhered to as a Christian.

I would like to point out what alienating effects are potentially produced by Barker creating the illusion of freedom for his audience. In labeling atheism as a product of freethinking, Barker is coloring religious thought as the product of enslaved, limited, or constrained thinking. This would largely serve to alienate his religious readers for the simple reason that religious conversion narratives also present the illusion of freedom, and Christians who have identified with Christianity might find the portrayal of their beliefs as a kind of enslavement to be, again, inaccurate and condescending.

Furthermore, if Barker is not entirely forthcoming and is instead writing to a secular audience, there is ample reason to think he still fails to identify with a secular collective. Atheist readers interested in genuine inquiry into reasons Christians adhere to religious beliefs might find Barker's unwillingness to accurately characterize those beliefs unproductive, a failure to contribute meaningfully to the investigation. As I stated earlier, his treatment of formal argumentation is not new, and his interest in his accomplishments, likely, does not serve as a relevant topoi for secular readers.

Conclusion

If, as I contend, Barker's memoir does not constitute a secular collective out of religious fundamentalists, and if Barker fails to make meaningful attempts to identify with religious readers, then how is his work significant to scholars of constitutive rhetoric? First, Barker's work helps emphasize the salience of Burke's theory of identification as the necessary foundation to a theory of constitutive rhetoric. Barker fulfills two of Charland's criteria for a theory of constitutive rhetoric (interpellating and providing the illusion of freedom), which I discussed previously. Although Barker does so sparingly, he fulfills the third criteria as well, that of constituting the audience transhistorically (appealing to individuals or groups in history to give added meaning to an identity). He largely does so by

associating himself transhistorically with a *type* of person, one with positivist ideals. For example he writes, "The issue is not so much *what* we think, but *how* we think. Epistemology. Scientists and rationalists gain knowledge by applying limits. Believers do the opposite" (94). Yet his attempts to constitute a collective fall short because of Barker's failure to identify areas of common substance and ambiguity between himself and religious fundamentalists. Specifically, Barker does not understand the ontological status or the textuality of Christian fundamentalists. The fact that he was once a Christian fundamentalist makes his failure to identify with them ironic. I want to be careful to say that even if he had successfully identified with his audience he may not have persuaded his religious readers to adhere to a secular identity, or to reject a Christian identity. However, it seems likely that had Barker acknowledged their beliefs and values of his religious readers, then they might have been entered into a more sympathetic and more gracious kind of conversation.

Barker's book can contribute to our understanding of how collectives constitute an identity in another way: Barker's experience suggests that members of groups that adhere to a rigid identity (one that embraces non-contingent claims and fails to embrace ambiguity), in the event of a conversion, will perhaps adhere to their new identity and express it in a similar fashion to their old identity, as a foundational or fundamental fact. Barker's language regarding reason and logic smacks of the absolute kind of dogma he claims was present in his religious fundamentalist identity. While Barker has proven he is willing to change his mind by adhering to atheism, his arrogant tone and aggressive criticism, paired with a failure to identify with his audience, give the appearance of one who is unlikely to genuinely entertain the idea that those he disagrees with are correct.

In essence, Barker seems to regard identities in the same manner he did as a religious fundamentalist. There are still fundamentalist characteristics present in Barker's attitude

towards others and reality. He still seems to embrace non-contingent claims (reason, if used properly, is infallible and universally applicable), there is no ambiguity in his claims (all religious belief is superstitious and delusional), and the truth is self-evident. In summary, Barker helps rhetorical scholars see that the kinds of identities one holds before a conversion, may perhaps limit the *kinds* of identities one may convert towards. Scholars may see, in the event of a conversion *how characteristics within old identities might be present in, and even limit potential conversions to, new identities.*

Chapter 3: Identity Constitution of an Unnamed Non-Believer: William Lobdell's

Losing My Religion

William Lobdell's description of his deconversion, and his subsequent secular identity, stands in stark contrast to Dan Barker's. William Lobdell covered the religion beat for the *L.A. Times* for 17 years. His desire to cover religion for the newspaper was largely influenced by his Catholic beliefs. Having given up church going as a teenager, he was reintroduced to Christianity at the age of 27 when, he says,"I had screwed up my life" (1). Lobdell was experiencing professional and marital problems: his career in journalism had "stalled" (2), and Lobdell had impregnated his girlfriend roughly six months before his first divorce would be final. Will Swaim, a friend of Lobdell's, recommended Lobdell seek out a relationship with god. Lobdell returned to church and began professing Christianity. His work at the *Times*, however, largely involved reporting on the Catholic Church sex scandal, and after many years of struggling to reconcile the Church's actions with his religious beliefs, Lobdell deconverted. He admits that his decision not to officially convert to Catholicism on Easter "was the first of many agonizing choices on my journey away from God . . . . [T]he thought (of no god) was so scary, so unwanted and so profound that it would be a long time before I actually admitted it" (159). Lobdell admits he felt "angry with God for making faith such a guessing game" (160). Finally, towards the end of his deconversion he confesses that, "I felt like an outsider, watching the rituals of a foreign tribe whose language I didn't understand" (203). His book *Losing My Religion* is a detailed account of his conversion to Catholicism, his coverage of the scandals, and his eventual deconversion.

My argument regarding Lobdell's memoir is two-fold. First, I argue that Lobdell is writing primarily to religious audiences. His appeals to religious readers' pathos are manifest in his use of religious language, his decision not to employ formal argumentation critiquing

belief in the existence of god, the compassionate tone present in his struggle to rationalize suffering, and the way he describes his deconversion as a passive loss of belief, rather than an aggressive rejection. I contend that Lobdell makes these appeals within his memoir in order to constitute himself as an example of a compassionate and ethical secular individual. He constitutes himself in such a way, I argue, in order to present religious readers with a desirable secular identity that might make readers' potential deconversions more likely. The second part of my argument is dependent upon the first in that I contend Lobdell is attempting to constitute a collective identity through his appeals, but he does so in an unorthodox way. I analyze how Lobdell articulates his secular identity as a loss of belief, with no replacement content or claims. I argue that even though Lobdell's memoir doesn't appear to meet Maurice Charland's three ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric, *Losing My Religion* nevertheless serves as an example of constitutive rhetoric. Lobdell's memoir, I argue, complicates our understanding of Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric by forcing us to reconsider how conversions *away* from religious ideologies happen. The deconversion that Lobdell describes does not represent a move towards an organized belief system like religion, but instead largely represents a conversion away from adherence to supernatural claims. Through an understanding of what Lobdell is trying to do rhetorically, I will complicate Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric.

Calling the Religious By Name

William Lobdell explicitly and implicitly constructs his appeals to identify with a religious audience. Lobdell calls out this religious audience explicitly by dedicating the book to his family and "[t]o those wounded by the church" (n. pag.). It is important to note that this dedication would obviously include religious individuals, primarily Catholic, who still adhere to Catholicism. Also, in the acknowledgements Lobdell pays further homage to the

victims. He writes, "Finally, I am most thankful to those people who have appeared in my stories over the years, giving me their time and sharing their heart, especially the survivors of the clergy sexual abuse. You are always in my thoughts. I thank you for telling your stories, and I admire how you strive each day to reclaim your life" (viii).

Lobdell's more implicit efforts to name a religious audience are readily evident. He frames his deconversion narrative in language that borrows from religious idioms and the Bible. Lobdell, in essence, is writing his deconversion narrative, at least partially, in a religious vocabulary. Lobdell opens the majority of his chapters with language that references Bible verses. For example, his first chapter begins with Jeremiah 29:11, which says, " 'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future' " (1). He also titles his chapters using religious idioms: "Born Again," "Answered Prayers," "My Ten Commandments," "A Spiritual Body Blow," "Millstones Around Their Necks," "Rebuild My Church," and "The Dark Night of the Soul." Lobdell, even as he adheres to a secular identity, is consubstantial with his religious readers through his use of religious metaphors. Burke writes that "substance, in the old philosophies, was an *act*; and a way of life is an *acting-together*; and in acting together, men have common . . . ideas, attitudes that make them *consubstantial*" (*Rhetoric* 21). By framing his argument in religious language, Lobdell is "acting together"—creating common substance—with his religious readers, enabling them to identify with him.

In addition to being consubstantial through the use of religious language, Lobdell's compassion (seen in the dedication and foreword) regarding victims who might still be religious is an attempt to appeal to his readers' pathos and be consubstantial in "attitude." While kindness and sympathy are not strictly Christian values, they are articulated specifically within the Christian Bible multiple times.[xiii] If Lobdell successfully expresses

these feelings towards his religious audience, there is fertile ground for identification as they might recognize values they view as their own within a secular person (Lobdell). However, regardless of Lobdell's success, these strategies represent Lobdell's naming, or Althusser's "calling out," the religious as his intended audience.

Furthermore, the strategies through which Lobdell employs religious idioms and pathos in order to name a religious audience offer a figurative olive branch towards his religious audience, notifying them that he does not intend to write a polemic similar to many recent New Atheist texts. Lobdell claims that his story is not directly representative of the New Atheist movement that often takes on a malicious tone. Lobdell writes, "The best selling trio of Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris are engaging polemists . . . . But I am not as confident in my disbelief as they are. Their disbelief has a religious quality to it that I'm not ready to take on" (271). Here Lobdell articulates a secular identity even as he distances himself from those most famous for adhering to secular worldviews. Simultaneously, he also helps his audience of religious moderates distinguish themselves from unproductive religious beliefs. In the quote above, Lobdell enervates a *kind* of belief, one that is overly dogmatic. In contrasting atheist dogma with religious faith, Lobdell seems most wary of the "disbelief" that has a "religious quality to it." Lobdell's effort to weaken belief that is overly dogmatic is a stark contrast to the efforts of Barker. Whereas Barker appears to trade one kind of fundamentalism for another, Lobdell's use of religious idioms and Christian scripture paint his secular identity as one that is less rigid and dogmatic.

The lack of formal argumentation throughout Lobdell's memoir appears to be another attempt to speak directly to and identify with religious audiences. Lobdell makes no attempt to refute the traditional arguments for god. For example, the teleological argument for god, which posits an observable design in nature and, hence, a divine creator, is used within many

formal debates regarding the existence of god. Atheists, in turn, have argued that the evolutionary process mimics this design in order to refute the telelogical argument for god.[xiv] However, Lobdell pays little attention to this kind of argumentation. Furthermore, Lobdell offers no treatment of science or physics that might show the likelihood of the existence of a god. Instead, his evidence, largely anecdotal and presented gradually, focuses on his own deconversion. Lobdell never states this explicitly, but given the fact that he consults with theologians throughout his deconversion (he details his correspondence with pastor and Ph.D. John Huffman from 235-243) and given the fact that he reads the aforementioned New Athiests and considers them "engaging," it seems obvious that Lobdell is well aware of formal arguments for and against the existence of god. Yet he chooses not to include them within his account of how he lost his religious beliefs.

I believe the lack of formal argumentation strengthens the main argument of my chapter, which is that Lobdell attempts to constitute a collective secular identity for religious readers to deconvert towards. Formal argumentation, presumably, would not present religious audiences any comfort to counteract the emotional turmoil they might go through during a deconversion, nor would it be the most persuasive kind of appeal. Instead, Lobdell relies largely on appeals to pathos, like his sympathy for victims of the Catholic Church sex scandal, in order to articulate the problems and inconsistencies that led to his loss of faith.

Lobdell's decision not to treat formal argumentation for and against the existence of god within his book implies that Lobdell does not see this as an effective means of naming his religious audience. If Lobdell is trying to name a religious audience in order to help them articulate a secular identity, then his strategy of appealing to pathos, using religious idioms, expressing religious values, and largely ignoring formal argumentation implies that he sees formal argumentation as an impediment to him reaching his audience. (Barker, in contrast,

spent the vast majority of his time focusing on irrational beliefs and logical fallacies.) Rather, Lobdell is concerned with helping them note a set of principles and values they already adhere to and a nonreligious vocabulary for articulating those principles. I contend that had treatment of formal argumentation been present in Lobdell's memoir, this would have impeded his ability to create ambiguity present when nonbelievers, like Lobdell, appear to express Christian values in their behavior.

Lobdell attempts to identify with a religious audience, again, when he openly struggles to rationalize suffering. Examples of his attempt to rationalize immorality and suffering are ubiquitous and varied. One such example is in Chapter 5, "Shot Out of a Canon," in which Lobdell contrasts the behavior of non-Christian individuals with the behavior of openly Christian individuals. The dilemma he openly struggles with is how he might rationalize why some non-Christian individuals enact values he considers Christian while some Christians choose, instead, to act immorally. Specifically, Lobdell interviews a Reformed Jewish couple, the Samueli's, who devote significant time and money to charity that benefits all religions. Henry Samueli openly condemns fundamentalism, saying his company is "multicultural" and that "[o]ne of the things I like most about Reform Judaism is that it promotes tolerance of various religions and cultures. I'm very much against orthodox religions of all kinds" (65). Lobdell contrasts the Samueli's openness and generosity with the secretive and sometimes destructive behavior of priests at the front of the Catholic Church sex scandal.

Lobdell's use of narratives serves not only as an alternative to formal argumentation, but also provides an avenue for him to attempt to rationalize suffering that god might have prevented. As I mentioned earlier, Lobdell's memoir is dedicated to and focuses on many stories of Catholics who suffered during the Catholic Church sex scandal. Lobell

sympathetically acknowledges the pain the victims of the Catholic Church have been through as he recalls his reporting on their stories while at the *L.A. Times*. In chapter 15, "At the Edge of the Earth," Lobdell writes about an Alaskan named Peter Kobuk, a victim of a Catholic missionary who raped an entire generation of Alaska Native boys. Lobdell writes, "My encounter with [Peter] would show me the limits of my faith, measured against the stubbornness of his" (215). After interviewing Kobuk, Lobdell explains that he failed to rationalize suffering like Kobuk's: "It was hard to worship a God that let this kind of thing happen" (231). Lobdell finally concludes, "I just didn't believe anymore . . . . I had seen too many innocent people live out lives full of tragedy and pain" (240).

Lobdell's compassion towards Kobuk and others like him shows he is interested in the sharing of experience within his narrative as a means to constitute an ethical secular identity. Lobdell is interested in sharing experience *more so than conducting a formal debate*. Lobdell's compassionate tone creates the impression that the doubts his experiences raised are not expressed in an attempt to maliciously critique religious faith. Rather, his doubts are expressed in the interest of articulating a genuine insecurity he had as a Catholic.

Another tragic narrative Lobdell tells to show his struggle to rationalize suffering is one regarding a Catholic educator, Father Michael Harris. Lobdell explicitly notes the behavior of church officials like Harris, and the subsequent suffering caused, as the primary source of his doubt. Lobdell's initial exposure to the sex scandal was his coverage of Father Michael "Hollywood" Harris, who was a principle at Mater Dei High School. After former students filed lawsuits, claiming they were sexually assaulted by Father Harris, Lobdell began struggling with his beliefs (the lawsuits were subsequently settled out of court, with a record payout from the Catholic Church, despite an admission in writing from Father Harris). Lobdell writes, "For me, the Father Hollywood story was a spiritual body blow, but I didn't

sense it at the time . . . . Much that would trouble me about my faith in the next five years of reporting was neatly contained in the Father Hollywood story." And those things that troubled Lobdell "would be recurrent subjects of my reporting" (119-120).

In yet another example of how he uses his experience to constitute his doubt as a product of compassion, Lobdell notes that what bothered him most about covering the Catholic Church sex scandal was the "innocent people put in harm's way by the church's 'shepherds,' self-interest triumphing over Christian values, lies big and small and a general lack of courage among followers of Christ" (119-120). The anguish Lobdell felt during his extensive coverage of the scandal eventually led him to extreme alcohol consumption (something he had struggled with earlier in his life). "The only thing that quieted the victims' voices for me was alcohol . . . . It troubled me that I needed this self-medication; it wasn't good for my health and I hadn't earned the right to the pain" (145). Lobdell portrays himself as being unable to avoid both suffering along with the victims he reported on and observing how their suffering led him to question his belief in God. For example, after Lobdell spends eight pages detailing his conversations with Pastor Huffman in which they attempt to understand human suffering, Lobdell ultimately finds Huffman unpersuasive. Lobdell writes that "I just didn't believe anymore. I replied to John that though I appreciated his response, it was frustrating because I had seen too many innocent people live out lives full of tragedy and pain" (240) and "I had seen too much" (253). Lobdell's passive description of his loss of belief serves as yet another example of his attempts to constitute a collective secular identity in a compassionate way that identifies with religious readers. Lobdell employs sympathetic language that is ripe for identifying a common substance between Lobdell and his readers. Lobdell appears to constitute his deconversion in sympathetic language, specifically through his description of his deconversion as a *natural and unavoidable process*, rather than an

aggressive rejection. That Lobdell views the process as natural and unavoidable is evident in the way he writes, for example, that "[d]oubt . . . . seemed to have snuck up on me" (149). If Lobdell lost his religious beliefs passively because he could not reconcile the suffering he witnessed with the beliefs he once held despite his attempts to hold onto them, then he appears altruistic. At the very least, Lobdell appears genuine in his disbelief as he appears to have no ulterior motives—motives that might make him seem malicious towards religious individuals. In addition, Lobdell continues to construct compassion as the impetus for his passive deconversion, furthering his appeals to religious readers' pathos. He did not reject his beliefs actively or aggressively, nor did he desire for them to be wrong.

This passive falling away from his faith is foregrounded in Lobdell's title, *Losing My Religion*. His beliefs left *him*, so to speak. Several times throughout his memoir he articulates to his audience that he lost his religious beliefs in the sense that they became untenable as his beliefs conflicted with his experience. Lobdell also portrays his deconversion as an event that happened *to him* and not as a decision that he actively made. Lobdell eloquently summarizes his deconversion as a slow death: "If an autopsy could be done on [non-believers'] spiritual life, the cause of death wouldn't be murder or suicide. It would be natural causes – the organic death of a belief system that collapsed under the weight of experience and reason" (141). Lobdell's description of his deconversion as an unavoidable—even natural—event that happened to him helps his attempts to identify with his readers. He gains credibility because he does not appear, as Barker so clearly does, to be campaigning against all religious beliefs. Lobdell's disbelief is not dogmatic – it is not absolute. Rather, he portrays his disbelief as the product of a great deal of experience covering the religion beat.

Lobdell further describes his deconversion as passive by emphasizing the emotional trauma he experienced throughout his deconversion. It seems natural that in any attempt to

deconvert others, one might make claims about how positive an identity is or how much better it is to be nonreligious than religious. Lobdell does not make this move until the end of his memoir, and he does so with a measured tone. Instead, throughout his memoir Lobdell articulates the *agony* of his deconversion.

Lobdell's repeated expressions of his pain and frustration throughout his deconversion reinforce his claim that it was unavoidable and natural, for it is unlikely that anyone would be eager to endure such pain. Lobdell speaks of his agonizing deconversion as an especially trying stage in life, something to be endured or waited out. Lobdell does not describe a quixotic deconversion—one that is unrealistically pleasant or free from emotional turmoil. Furthermore, Lobdell's description of the anger and trauma make him appear honest about his loss of belief. In the quotes above, he articulates an experience that is filled with frustration, confusion, depression, and a great deal of insecurity. Lobdell's description of his deconversion as natural and unavoidable allow him to construct an implicit appeal to religious readers' pathos, which in turn helps him construct an ethical secular identity.

In summary, Lobdell's appeals to pathos call out a religious collective in order to help them identify with an ethical secular identity. Lobdell identifies with religious readers in the hopes that they might start to constitute a secular identity of their own. The strategies which reveal Lobdell's attempts to constitute a collective identity are paramount, as they serve as a foundation on which I build my argument advocating a modified understanding of the theory of Maurice Charland's constitutive rhetoric.

New Exigencies for New Identities and Modified Theories of Constitutive Rhetoric

While I am treating Lobdell's work as a kind of practical example of constitutive rhetoric, he, at first glance, appears not to achieve the first of three effects of constitutive rhetoric that Charland articulated in his 1987 article. A successful constitutive rhetoric is

difficult to predictably execute, according to Charland, largely because a rhetor, such as Lobdell, is attempting to constitute an audience that is always, already constructed with an *other* ideology and identity that is different from his. Lobdell's efforts, then, become that of naming the inchoate characteristics of a collective secular identity, characteristics that are present but have yet to be articulated for his audience.

It is important to be clear about what Lodbell is *not* trying do, which is deconvert all religious individuals. Charland notes that the stages of identification and persuasion of any conversion only come after identity constitution. Charland, who relies on Louis Althusser's theory of the identity, claims, "A subject is not 'persuaded' . . . . Support . . . is inherent to the subject position addressed by . . . rhetoric" and this support is inherent to the subject position because of "a series of narrative *ideological effects*" ("Constitutive" 134). I make the point that Lobdell is not trying to deconvert all religious individuals alongside the point that he relies on anecdote (stories, experiences) to constitute his own secular identity, in order to show that Lobdell seems aware that ideological effects within a narrative will be more effective than formal argumentation. Ironically, I begin this part of my argument by showing how Lobdell does not fulfill the narrative ideological effects within Charland's theory.

Charland writes, "The process of constituting a collective subject is the *first ideological effect* of constitutive rhetoric" (139). If a collective identity exists, Charland writes, then "it is only in ideology," which is expressed through a narrative detailing the struggles and experiences that a community might identify with. Usually, though, this collective, and its struggle and experiences, is given a name.

However, while Lobdell succeeds in detailed description of his struggles with faith and his frustration with his loss of religious belief, he stops short of putting a name on his secular identity. Lobdell identifies the problem of how to identify himself:

How to label myself was the toughest question. People—especially

journalists—love labels. They are a convenient shorthand to put people neatly

into a category. But my feelings about God weren't all that tidy. The truth was,

I didn't know whether a label fit me . . . . This was a question I have yet to

figure out. The closest I could get to a label was something along the lines of

"skeptical deist," "wavering deist" or "reluctant atheist." (269)

Lobdell's memoir deviates from another effect that Charland laid out: the effect of constituting a collective *transhistorically*. Besides not naming his secular identity, Lobdell does not point to any kind of rich history of non-believers, and he makes no substantial claims about any group of people preceding the New Athiest movement. Furthermore, as shown in the previous section, Lobdell actually attempts to distinguish himself from the New Atheist movement and the dogmatic kind of belief often present in their rhetoric. Lobdell largely uses his own experience as an observer and a Catholic as the grounds for identification with religious moderates.

Finally, Lobdell falls short of another of Charland's ideological effects: presenting the illusion of freedom for the collective to choose their identity. Charland claims, "The freedom of the protagonist . . . is but an illusion. This illusion is the *third ideological effect* of constitutive rhetoric. Freedom is illusory, because the narrative is already spoken or written" (141). However, Lobdell explicitly articulates the lack of freedom he experienced: "I just didn't believe in God anymore, despite my best attempts to hold on to my beliefs. Faith can't be willed into existence. There's no faking it" (244). No only does Lobdell's description of the lack of freedom appear honest, it shows the underlying power of Burke's identification in that an identity might likely be constituted through the process of identification long before an individual ever explicitly expresses his or her identity.

And as Burke explained, ambiguity is pivotal to the process of identification. Lobdell's appeals to religious pathos largely serve to create ambiguity between popular religious ideals and Lobdell's secular identity. To borrow Burke's terms, non A (secular) and A (compassion and grace) are combined within Lobdell's identity. So if we view Lobdell's constitution of an ethical secular identity as creating ambiguity and potentially unification, then there is a substance that might serve as the grounds for deconversion. Dana Anderson echoes the claim that ambiguity can serve as grounds for change. He writes, "Through these inevitable ambiguities [of language] . . . statements thus open themselves to the possibility of *transformation*" (*Identity's* 24).

I would like to emphasize the "possibility" Anderson speaks of when claiming ambiguity could lead to transformation or unification of the religious readers Lobdell is writing to since transformation is hardly formulaic. However, it is the ambiguity present in combining a secular identity with a compassionate identity that Lobdell is ultimately relying on as he articulates his loss (rather than his rejection) of belief, his compassion, and his respect for religious individuals. Burke noted that ambiguity exists inherently in language since words that "designate what a thing is" also name "something that it *is not*" (*Grammar* 23). Lobdell embraces this ambiguity when he constructs his identity as a compassionate, yet nonreligious, individual. While he never applies consistent titles to himself or his audience, his compassionate and respectful tone produces ambiguity because Christian doctrines often prescribe that compassion for its adherents. To see such characteristics coming from an individual who does not share the same beliefs as Christians would presumably produce ambiguity, which might produce a common ground for religious moderates and Lobdell.

So what does Lobdell accomplish with his memoir? If he fails to meet Charland's ideological effects, how is his memoir functioning rhetorically? I contend his memoir fulfills

the two standards for the two theories at the foundation of constitutive rhetoric: identification and identity constitution. Through Lobdell's appeals to pathos, identification appears to be likely. However, identity constitution, as Charland claims, comes earlier than identification in any conversion. Let me explain.

Charland claims that ideological discourses, like Lobdell's, are trapped in a bit of a conundrum: "persuasive discourse requires a subject-as-audience who is already constituted with an identity and within an ideology" (134). Essentially, Charland is claiming that *identity constitution is prior to Burkean identification*. Furthermore, while "identifications are rhetorical . . . [t]hey are also . . . logically prior to persuasion" (133). While there are numerous ways for the process of persuasion to fail, a successful persuasion, in regards to Charland's theory, would look something like this: Identity constitution, identification with others, then persuasion. If identification is prior to persuasion or conversion, then Lobdell would, presumably, find himself unsuccessful if he were asking his audience of religious moderates to convert on the spot. Rather, he is assuming that religious moderates are already partly constituted with a secular identity, and Lobdell, therefore, is attempting to identify with that aspect of their identity. If Lobdell is successful, and his audience identifies with his secular identity, then he has planted the seeds of conversion (persuasion).

However, there is an inherent difficulty with what Lobdell is trying to do. As I mentioned earlier, Lobdell is not trying to employ formal logic in an attempt to persuade. This would largely fail, because, as Charland notes "much of what we as rhetorical critics consider to be a product or a consequence of discourse, including social identity, *religious faith*, sexuality, and ideology is beyond the realm of rational or even free choice, beyond the realm of persuasion" (133) (italics added).

Instead of trying to persuade his religious readers to immediately deconvert, Lobdell, instead, appears to identify with the secular aspects of his audience's identity by describing his new secular identity, and thus creating ambiguity. In the "Epilogue," Lobdell articulates a peaceful, grateful secular identity that is content without religious beliefs. When he is asked what has replaced the role of God in his life, he claims, "The question caught me off guard because I'd felt no vacuum created by God's exit . . . . [B]ut it's a good question and it deserves a serious answer" (277). Lobdell claims a "tremendous sense of gratitude," a closer "circle of friends," and "relief" have fulfilled him emotionally since his loss of belief (278).

So how is Lobdell an example of a new kind of constitutive rhetoric? First, I claim Lobdell's failure to meet Charland's ideological effects are largely the product of new exigencies. Lobdell's identity has no fixed title because there is no stock secular identity; there is only the common ground of no longer being persuaded by religious claims. Lobdell is trying to help his readers make the transition he made, and titles might actually impede this process since the deconversion is more a loss of belief than an adoption of a new ideology. Furthermore, Lobdell does not constitute his secular identity transhistorically because the need to identify one's self by the fact that they *do not* adhere to Christianity, at least in the U.S., is a relatively new exigency (thus, the *New* Atheist movement).

In the "Epilogue," Lobdell details what his life is like after his loss of faith. Ironically, much of what he notes is not new behavior, new morals, or a new value system. If the secular identity Lobdell describes is new to religious individuals, it is new in the sense that it has abandoned certain explanations of reality. "Truth be told," he writes, "my actions aren't much different from when I was a Christian" (277). This epistemological loss of a unified system of morals is reflective of the Sam Harris quote in the first chapter, in which he claims that Atheism as a belief system has little to no content, aside from the denial of belief in the

supernatural. Lobdell seems to find this claim true since he emphasizes that with his loss of faith, not much has changed. Not even his morals:

> What the Bible promises - peace and serenity – I've found in larger measures as a non-believer. My morals and values haven't changed . . . . A sociopath, not an atheist, has no conscience and no ability to tell right from wrong . . . . Usually when I do wrong, it's due to selfishness and poor judgment overcoming common sense, self-restraint and experience. Many of my basic life struggles are the same. I still worry too much. Hold grudges for too long. Lie, usually in small ways, too easily. Drink more than I should. Am too impatient with the kids. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. (277)

What Lobdell claims *is* different in his secular identity is the absence of confusion: "Frustrating, endless confusion about the way the world works disappeared. My life makes better sense now, without a personal God in the equation. My mind isn't troubled anymore by the unsolvable mysteries that plagued me as a believer" (275). This declaration about the unexpected peace Lobdell found within a secular identity subtly creates identification with religious moderates, in that they might see their struggles to explain certain phenomena (human suffering at the hands of Christian leaders) present in Lobdell's experience as well. Here religious moderates would likely find common ground with Lobdell. This identification between Lobdell and his readers, it should be noted again, is the foundation of Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric and is based on a kind of secular identity constitution many religious readers already have in part.

Conclusion

Lobdell's memoir is a tangible example of an attempt to constitute a collective because he is appealing to a *collective's* ideals: kindness, sympathy towards victims, and

humanity's need to understand reality are all reflected in religious moderates and their language. It is a little tenuous as to whether or not we can say this was a successful constitutive rhetoric.

But can a collective be constituted predominantly by a loss of belief or by *not* being persuaded? I argue that it can. Up to this point, the overwhelming majority of conversion narratives that have been studied detail a conversion *towards* a set of beliefs or ideologies. But Lobdell's memoir forces rhetorical scholars to reconsider conversions because while atheism, agnosticism, or other non religious identities might not have much content, individuals have found it necessary to identify their secular constitution in contrast to the religious population in the United States. Lobdell's deconversion represents a growing number of conversions that are primarily an undoing of sorts, a movement away from their old ideology and towards a secular identity, which they have always had regarding many things. Almost all of us have a secular identity regarding our understanding of how electricity works, what the solar system is, and how salt is formed.

The fact that there are a growing number of people who identify themselves as non-religious shows that Lobdell's memoir is timely, if nothing else. Atheist, Agnostic, Agnostic-Atheist, nonreligious, and secular are just a few ways in which new collectives have begun to label themselves by what they are not. But without a clear articulate title and without a rich history that constitutes a secular identity, Lobdell's memoir provides an impetus for rhetorical scholars to reconsider a theory of constitutive rhetoric.

<u>Conclusions</u>

It seems appropriate to return to my final research question I put forth in the opening chapter in order to see this study has contributed substantive answers: What implications are there for rhetorical scholars and their understanding of conversions away from identities that hold foundational, non-contingent beliefs? I believe there are many implications to be drawn from a more intimate understanding of deconversion narratives, but two seem especially relevant. The first is a modified theory of Charland's constitutive rhetoric. The second is a broader understanding of how individuals with disparate identities divide themselves further—how different collectives constitute themselves in contrast to those they disagree with.

First, the theory of constitutive rhetoric that Maurice Charland articulated does not fully prepare rhetorical scholars for analyzing secular identities. It is becoming increasingly important to understand the secular conversions, such as Barker's and Lobdell's, away from certain identities, or *how people identify themselves by what they are not*. A review of Kenneth Burke's *Rhetoric of Motives* reminds us that division, movements away from identities, is the rhetorical counterpart to identification (*Rhetoric* 23). To be clear, this is not an attempt to isolate identity studies solely as conversions away from an identity. Any conversion is simultaneously movement towards and movement away from some identity. But if deconversion narratives, as I contend, are articulated *primarily* as movements away from certain kinds of identities, then the current theory of constitutive rhetoric, the theory regarding how collective identities are constituted, may need to be qualified or revised. This should not be understood as pointing out any weakness in Charland's theory of constitutive rhetoric, but rather, it is an effort to articulate an exigency that has grown significantly since

Charland's article was originally published nearly 25 years ago. New contexts produce new exigencies, which form new identities.

Take Barker and Lobdell, for example. Lobdell attempts to constitute a collective by effectively identifying with his religious readers using a compassionate tone. Yet he does so while failing to fulfill all three ideological effects of Charland's theory. Despite his apparent failure, I maintain Lobdell's attempts to identify with religious individuals present rhetorical scholars with an example of an individual who has identified himself by what he is not and who hopes to help others identify themselves in a similar fashion. Conversely, Barker makes moves that would *appear* to fulfill all three of Charland's ideological effects of a constitutive rhetoric. Yet, his attempts identify with religious *or* secular readers and constitute a *freethinking* collective appear overwhelmingly ineffective. Charland's theory, and his treatment and extension of Kenneth Burke's theory of identification, are extremely valuable to rhetorical scholars. But I argue, in an effort to embrace ambiguity, that the growing secular movement can show rhetorical scholars how collective identities can sometimes be constituted in a messier fashion, without necessarily fulfilling all three ideological effects. As Lobdell shows through his deconversion, a secular identity can be more ambiguous in the sense that it is not necessary to label one's self in order to adhere to secular belief. If we all have, in part, secular identities, then labeling one's beliefs as secular becomes a movement away from a *kind* of belief regarding *specific* claims. Specifically, a secular identity is more ambiguous than religious identities because of the lack of content readily available upon recognition of somebody as secular.

Relying on Lobdell's memoir, I argue that it is more likely a deconversion will occur by dissuading, or by dislodging, religious belief from one's identity, than by confronting it explicitly with aggressive criticism. Barker's deconversion confirms this as well, given that

he was not exposed to aggressive criticism, he already valued liberal values, and he had time to cultivate his secular beliefs gradually. I believe that when both Barker and Lobdell's experiences inform our understanding of constitutive rhetoric, it is clear that the ambiguity inherent in secular identities, the lack of a stock set of beliefs or values, is what distinguishes a conversion towards religious belief from a deconversion away from religious belief.

The second implication builds on the first, but is broader in scope: the conflict of values within deconversion narratives is a microcosm of a conflict that might occur between different identities. If secular identities and their conversions create a fertile ground for research for rhetorical scholars, then they do so largely because it is within a conversion that humanistic or secular values conflict with non-contingent religious or fundamentalist beliefs. It might be going too far to claim that every individual holds non-contingent beliefs, but I feel comfortable claiming every individual holds non-contingent *attitudes* towards those they disagree with. Attitudes, which might be considered any kind of general feeling that is not explicitly articulated, often lie unexamined. If non-contingent beliefs and attitudes effect how we define ourselves, or if these beliefs and attitudes serve as motivation for us to identify ourselves by saying, "*I am not that*," then the conflict of non-contingent values and secular values present in deconversion narratives becomes a vital area of research for rhetorical scholars. This is so because these deconversion narratives become case studies, or microcosms, of how a member of one culture might negotiate his/her beliefs and attitudes regarding a member of another culture. In short, deconversions allow rhetorical scholars to examine Burke's necessitarian principle in action.

I believe, in principle, this is what Crowley was considering when she wrote *Towards a Civil Discourse:* How do we understand those who identify themselves by adhering to beliefs directly opposed to ours? What kinds of appeals are available to us to ethically

navigate a path between two disparate ideologies? There are numerous and nuanced answers to these two questions alone. And Crowley seems timely in addressing the issue for the field of rhetoric.

The relevance of this issue seems to pull other fields of study into view, as well, predominantly the fields of politics and religion. Within the last two years numerous books have been published that rely on statistics to show that within the U.S., political ideologies are growing more isolated and more extreme; individuals are aligning with collectives that define their ideologies and their agendas in opposition to those who are *not them*.[xv]

Furthermore, disparate religious identities are closely related to violence internationally. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict in Israel and the Protestant-Catholic conflict in Ireland are two examples of ongoing international violence that appears to thrive off of two groups who define themselves in opposition to the other. Even in the U.S., to date, the interaction between secular and religious identities within the public sphere has not been especially amicable. Barker has shown that within the more emphatic declarations of what one *is not*, there is a great deal of opportunity for hyperbole and polemical language, not to mention a potentially fundamentalist attitude towards those you disagree with. However, Lobdell has shown that it is possible to interact with those who might have ideological differences, that it is possible to do so with respect and affection, and he does so largely by emulating the recommendations of Sharon Crowley, which I summarized in the first chapter. Crowley recommends exemplifying liberal values through a constructed narrative and to confirm those shared values at given opportunities as a means of disrupting fundamentalist belief. As Lobdell's memoir shows, I contend that Crowley's recommendations serve as an especially effective means of identifying with others.

Sam Harris claims that Christians are atheists with regards to Islam and vice versa. Thus, religious individuals likely consider an *other* religion with secular values in order to disagree with it. For example, if Muslims adheres to non contingent beliefs, and do so explicitly, then there is no other grounds on which Christians can disagree with them, since Christians, also, explicitly adhere to non contingent beliefs. So it is that Muslims and Christians, presumably, already share liberal values regarding many aspects of their understanding of the world around them and how it works. They can even use those liberal forms of argumentation (demand for tangible evidence and logical coherence, for example) to evaluate the validity of religious belief (as long as it is another's religious beliefs). Barker and Lobdell, in light of Crowley, have presented rhetorical scholars with methods of negotiating this kind of conflict between secular identities and religious ones, and their writing can help us understand a little better how people identify themselves by what they are not. Furthermore, they help us understand how those with religious identities might be called to embrace more secular identities.

If I may return again to Burke, I would like to conclude by recommending rhetorical scholars remind each other not only of Burke's study of identification as a means of understanding how individuals align and separate, but also to his study of division for similar ends. Deconversions humbly remind scholars that, sometimes, the most intimate and sacred beliefs by which individuals identify themselves are by contrasting themselves with what they are not. Burke wrote that identification and theories of how disparate constitutions can become consubstantial, immediately implies that they are always, already *not*, and thus presents us an opportunity and an exigency to understand division alongside identification.

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i Sharon Crowley articulates two tenants of Christian fundamentalist belief that heldistinguish it from moderately religious individuals: belief in "the doctrines of personal salvation and biblical inerrancy" (*Towards* 105). Fundamentalism is non-

contingent and foundational in that its adherents subscribe to belief through revelation (scripture) and faith (belief in spite of, or the absence of, evidence), neither of which can be falsified, instead of physical evidence, observation, or rational inquiry. It should be noted that there are many kinds of fundamentalists, in that fundamentalists are those who strictly adhere to a set of beliefs. However, it is the characteristics of Christian fundamentalism that Crowley articulates above which lead me to view Barker as a former fundamentalist.

[ii] For the purposes of this thesis, non-contingent beliefs or claims are ones that apply universally, or absolutely, for all individuals, yet these same beliefs are not based on evidence that is available to others. Revelation, for instance, or claims about a being that has no tangible manifestation (God for example), I consider to be noncontingent.

[iii] This is not to be confused with modern day liberals or members of the Democratic Party. Rather, Crowley uses liberal or liberalism to refer to the principles that became valued during the Enlightenment, and ultimately are present in our founding U.S. documents (logic, reason, empirical observation, personal freedom, equality for everyone before the law) (*Towards* 3).

[iv] "Constitutive Rhetoric: The Case of the Peuple Quebecois."

[v] The theory of "interpellating" was originally posited by Louis Althusser in his 1971 chapter "Ideology and Ideological Apparatuses." The seminal aspect of Althusser's theory is that the audience is always, already a subject, and they are just waiting to be constituted. I will discuss this aspect of interpellation at greater length, later.

[vi] Journalist Dan Gilgoff echoed this growing number of nonreligious people in his March 2009 *U.S. News* article "Leaving Religion Behind." He cites a national survey from Trinity College's Program on Public Values that claims those that adhere to no religious tradition make up 15% of the U.S. population. Non religious individuals accounted for only 8% of the U.S. population in 1990.

[vii] The fact that Barker relies on formal argumentation is an interesting contrast with William Lobdell and his book *Losing My Religion*. Lobdell's book is the topic of my next Chapter. Lobdell relies largely on anecdotal evidence and personal experience to explain his deconversion. Lobdell also makes numerous attempts to identify with religious audiences.

[viii] Again, Lobdell's rhetorical effects are quite the opposite from Barker's. While Barker presents the illusion of freedom to his readers, Lobdell articulates his deconversion as unavoidable. Lobdell contextualizes his deconversion within his own detailed experience, and seems to treat his belief as a product of his environment, moreso than an independent act.

[ix] Shermer publishes *Skeptic* magazine, writes for *Scientific America* and *Why Darwin Matters*. He is a renowned atheist.

[x] Hitchens is an international journalist who has gone on to participate in numerous religious debates about the poor effects religion has had on the world. Notably he engaged Former Prime Minister Tony Blair in a debate in Toronto on November 26, 2010 titled "Is Religion a Force For Good in the World." He is also the author of *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.

[xi] Julia Sweeney is a comedian and former cast member of "Saturday Night Live." Her play detailing her deconversion is titled "Letting Go of God" and has played on Broadway. She is also a renowned atheist.

xii In *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.*
xiii See Proverbs 11:25, Luke 6:36-38, and Acts 20:35b.
xiv See Chapter 1, titled "Tell Me Why," of Daniel Dennett's *Darwin's Dangerous Idea.* Specifically, see his comparison of the function of evolution to the function of algorithms and how complexity is a byproduct of the function of evolution.
xv Two such books are Bill Bishop's *The Big Sort* and Cass Sunstein's *Going to Extremes.*

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VITA

Robert James Tousley was born June 27, 1983, in Plano, Texas. He received his Bachelor of Arts Degree, with a major in English Literature and a minor in History from The University of North Texas in Denton, Texas, on December of 2008.

He enrolled in graduate study at Texas Christian University in August of 2009. While working on his Master of Arts, he served as a Research Assistant to Professor Melanie Kill and Professor Ann George. Furthermore, he served as a Teaching Assistant to Professor Joddy Murray and Professor Melanie Kill.

Robert would like to express his love to Rochelle Teresa Rodriguez. They have one daughter, Chloe Caroline Tousley, who was born October 21, 2010.

ABSTRACT

CONSTITUTIVE RHETORIC OF SECULAR IDENTITIES: CONVERSIONS AWAY
FROM

by
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There is a renewed exigence for scholars of rhetoric to examine how groups identify themselves by what they are not. I contend this exigence is present in deconversion narratives, narratives that articulate a *loss* of belief. I analyze two disparate conversion narratives in order to build upon Maurice Charland's theory of Constitutive Rhetoric. Books by Dan Barker, an ordained Christian Pastor, and William Lobdell, a journalist covering the religion beat serve as my texts. Barker's narrative serves as an example of a failed constitutive rhetoric, and I argue Barker's failures reemphasize the salience of Kenneth Burke's theory of identification to constitutive rhetoric. Barker's narrative serves as an example of a successful constitutive rhetoric, despite lacking Charland's ideological effects of constitutive rhetoric. I perform this analysis in order to give attention to a particular kind of identity constitution, one that is articulated primarily as a movement away from an ideology.