

“Scientifically Spiritual, Rationally Ritualistic: Manufacturing Meaning in Nonreligious Spaces”  
Speaker: Jacqui Frost, Postdoctoral Fellow, Religion and Public Life Program

On the morning of November 6, RPLP Postdoctoral Fellow Dr. Jacqui Frost joined 25 researchers, scholars, students, and community members via Zoom to discuss a potential research article on spirituality and manufactured rituals of nonreligious populations. There has been an unprecedented growth of nonreligious populations in America over the last 30 years, growing from 8 percent in 1990 to nearly 25 percent as of 2018 according to the General Social Survey. Of this 25 percent, 3 percent identify as atheists and 5 percent as agnostics, with the remaining stating that they believe in “nothing in particular.” Frost suggests that this bolstering population signals a historical shift with cultural implications, including politics and social norms.

According to Frost, religiosity used to be a social benchmark for character, often causing individuals to conflate being religious with being a good person. Consequently, atheists and nonreligious individuals have been seen as emotionally shallow, rational and individualist, and amoral. Atheism and other forms of nonreligion are typically understood to be a lack of beliefs and practices. For this, atheists are often seen as one of the most disliked groups in America. The rise of atheist and nonreligious populations challenges these social conventions, as a greater fraction of society adopts this label. Frost’s research suggests that one of the ways that we can begin to understand these populations and draw likeness between religious and nonreligious practices is through researching how spirituality and rituals exists in nonreligious spaces. Nonreligious individuals have used spirituality, a term once used exclusively in religious connotations, increasingly. Understanding how nonreligious groups have drawn from and modernized religious language and practice may help deconstruct some of the stigma around atheism in contemporary times.

Frost's findings draw upon her ethnography of the Sunday Assembly, a nonreligious gathering that embodies communal experiences similar to traditional religious spaces, as well as interviews with Sunday Assembly members. From these in-depth methods, Frost posits that atheists and agnostics are actively constructing new languages and practices for spirituality that take inspiration from religious predecessors but incorporate scientific explanations. She coins this as "scientific spirituality," which she defines as "finding awe, wonder, and transcendence in science and using scientific research and methods to understand and actively cultivate secular rituals and spiritual experiences." Rationality and science are used to reproduce feelings of spirituality for these gatherings, some individuals flocking to meditation, vulnerability, collective singing, and dancing in hopes to manufacture spirituality. Others, coined within a subgroup called "serendipitous spiritualists," find unpredictable, organic, and natural events being more conducive to spiritual experience than manufactured attempts.

In sum, Frost's research disrupts the presumed and dated dichotomies between science and spirituality, ritual and rationality, and atheism and transcendence. Her research provides greater insight into a traditionally stigmatized group in America and helps humanize the group by uncovering some of their commonalities with religious populations.