

Groundbreaking Op-Ed Puts Spotlight on Anti-Atheist Bigotry

Gregory J. Paul

American mainstream media have long criticized discrimination against Jews, African Americans, and Hispanics, yet they've been doing an excellent job of playing down, if not outright ignoring, chronic bigotry against atheists. The rarity of atheist-friendly op-eds on major papers' opinion pages has been a reflection of this bias.

Having conducted groundbreaking research on the links between differing rates of religion and nonreligion and socio-economic conditions, I have submitted op-eds to major papers for years without success. After the repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell," it occurred to me that the time might finally be right. Rather than explicitly (if politely) claiming that religion is inferior or that atheism is superior on a societal basis, I envisioned a call for ending bigotry against disbelievers, in the tradition of Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." It would start with a calm but unmistakably outraged description of the problem, back up that call with statistics discrediting the common thesis that the lack of religion is bad for people and societies, and finally demand an end to this nonsense. And it would be signed by Americans who have conducted social research into matters religious and otherwise. I sent a draft to Phil Zuckerman, who did a rewrite. Daniel Dennett, Darren Sherkat, and Linda LaScola also signed on. I submitted the piece with high expectations, and it

was accepted the same day. The version the Washington Post published can be seen online at www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-americans-still-dislike-atheists/2011/02/18/AFqgnwGF_story.html. Of course, the essay had to conform to the Washington Post's length restrictions and also to its long-standing but unfortunate policy of crediting no more than two coauthors.

Having an item appear on the pages of one of the country's two major national papers is always a significant event—the Washington Post and the New York Times still carry more clout than newer media. The op-ed's print version alone appeared in over half a million copies. Because the Post is the capital's paper, numerous persons of influence read it. Its online impact became apparent when Sam Harris sent a message that it was exploding on Facebook, with more than eighty thousand people recommending it. From what I gather, this essay became one of the most widely read opinion pieces in Washington Post history, which would make it perhaps the most widely read atheist tract since the wave of "new atheist" best sellers. The nation has been put on notice that atheists need to be treated as first-class citizens.

The following is an expanded version of the original op-ed, signed by four of its coauthors.

Stop Dumping on Atheists (Or, Knock Off the Anti-Atheist Bigotry)

Gregory J. Paul, Daniel Dennett, Darren Sherkat, and Linda LaScola

Long after Jews and African Americans made great strides, and even as homosexuals gain respect, acceptance, and new rights, a major portion of Americans still don't like atheists much. Those who don't believe in God are considered by many to be immoral, wicked, angry—to the degree that youth are forbidden to join the Boy Scouts merely because they refuse to believe in the supernatural. It would be considered an outrage if Jewish boys or young blacks were so treated. Athe-

ist soldiers are rated potentially deficient when they do not score as sufficiently "spiritual" in military psychological evaluations. It remains common to comment casually that "there are no atheists in foxholes"—try replacing the word *atheists* with *Christians*, *Jews*, or *blacks* and see how it sounds. One person's atheism frequently becomes a point of family strife in a way that used to be typical of those of differing religions (even while atheists tend to be tolerant of their more-pious

relations). How many openly nonsupernaturalistic persons host a prominent national opinion program? When a recent survey found that atheists tend to know more about the Bible than Christians do, why did the resulting panel discussions on CNN and the like feature the usual sets of believers of various sorts, with nary an atheist to be found? Surveys find that most Americans refuse or are reluctant to vote for nontheists (who vote for believers all the time).

In other words, nonbelievers are one minority still commonly denied in practical terms the right to assume public office, the constitutional ban on religious tests notwithstanding.

Bigotry against skeptics of the supernatural is deep-set, yet it has slipped under the American sociopolitical radar—so much so that even Bill Maher on his *Real Time* (February 11, 2011) said that gays are the only group still subject to widespread discrimination in the United States. A Muslim panelist pointed out that Muslims are too, but of all people the creator of *Religulous* had forgotten to include his own nontheist cohort.

The stunning anti-atheist discrimination is egged on by religious conservatives who stridently and uncivilly declare that the lack of faith is dangerous and detrimental to society, rendering nonbelievers intrinsically suspect and justifying their marginalization as second-class citizens. It has long been an American political sport to verbally assault those who commit no greater crime than to conclude rationally that the evidence does not support the existence of extraordinary entities and powers. These slanders exploit the anti-atheist feelings genuinely held among the public; still, they would not be tolerated if directed toward other minorities.

Almost as disturbing as casual and common prejudice against nontheists is how rarely the bias is denounced by the mainstream that dependably springs to the defense when other minorities face intolerance.

Is all this knee-jerk dislike of atheists warranted? Not even close.

A large segment of scientists is skeptical when it comes to anything supernatural. In other words, many of our best and brightest—people upon whom the success of our nation depends—are ungodly. Atheistic scientists tend to be good and very productive citizens. Yet they are disparaged for their refusal to conform to the religious norm.

A new and growing body of social-science research reveals that atheists of various stripes—indeed, nonreligious people in general—are far from being as unsavory as many Americans assume. Multiple studies

have found that on basic questions of morality and human decency—things like the governmental use of torture, the death penalty, corporal punishment of children, racism, sexism, homophobia, anti-Semitism, environmental degradation, human rights, militarism, and the like—the irreligious tend to be *more* ethical than their religious peers. They tend to be *sharply* more ethical than the extremely religious. At the societal level, we know that murder rates are far lower in secularized nations like Japan or Sweden than in the far more religious United States, which also has a much greater portion of its population in prison. Even within our own country, those states with the highest levels of faith in God and church attendance, such as Louisiana and Mississippi, have significantly higher mur-

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der rates than far less religious states like Vermont and Oregon.

As individuals, atheists tend to score high on measures of intelligence, especially verbal ability, and scientific literacy. They raise their children to solve problems rationally, to make up their own minds on existential questions, and to obey the Golden Rule so as not to cause harm to others. They are more likely to practice safe sex than the strongly religious and are less likely to be nationalistic or ethnocentric. They value freedom of thought. They tend to be voracious readers. And while many studies show that secular Americans don't fare as well as the religious when it comes to certain indicators of mental health or subjective well-being, new scholarship is actually challenging such claims, showing that the relationship among atheism, the-

ism, and mental health/well-being is extremely complex. After all, Denmark, which is among the least religious countries in the history of the world, consistently rates as being the happiest of nations, full of satisfied, contented citizens. And in studies of apostates—people who were religious but then went on to reject their religion—large numbers report feeling happier and more liberated in their post-religious lives.

Nontheism isn't all balloons and ice cream. Some studies suggest that suicide rates tend to be higher among the nonreligious, although others disagree.

But surveys indicating that religious Americans are happier and healthier are apparently misleading because they include among the “nonreligious” fence-sitters who


are as likely to believe in God as not. Atheists confident in their unbelief do about as well as devout believers. On most measures of societal success, from rates of poverty to teen pregnancy, abortion, and STD infections, obesity, and crime—from juvenile and adult mortality to healthy economies, illicit drug use or mental health—high levels of secularity are consistently correlated with positive outcomes in all First World nations other than the United States.

None of the advanced, secular democracies suffers from the combined social ills endemic here in Christian America.

Over two thousand years ago, whoever wrote Psalm 14 of the Bible claimed that atheists were foolish and corrupt, incapable of doing any good. These put-downs have had tenacious sticking power over the cen-

turies, and negative stereotyping of atheists is alive and well. And yet, like all stereotypes, they simply *aren't true*. Moreover, they may tell us more about those who harbor them than those maligned by them. So when the likes of Glenn Beck, Sarah Palin, Bill O'Reilly, and Newt Gingrich engage in the politics of division and destruction by maligning atheists, they do so in flagrant disregard of reality.

Like some other minorities, atheists are enjoying rapid growth. Despite all the bigotry, nontheists have tripled their relative numbers since the 1960s. This growth is driven largely by conversion, making it all the more spectacular since nonbelievers do not reproduce rapidly. Compare it to Mormons, who despite having on average quite large families have only doubled in proportional numbers over the last half-century. Studies by Pew indicate that the nation is only half as religious as the most theistic countries. A lack of religious sentiment is especially widespread among the young, whose interest in religion and its endless disputes and intolerance is fast waning. Surveys designed to overcome Americans' understandable reluctance to admit atheism find that as many as sixty million—a fifth of us—are not believers to a greater or lesser extent.

So when it comes to your irreligious fellow citizens, accord them the same respect as first-class citizens that you display toward other minorities. It's the American thing to do. 

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Greg Paul is an independent researcher who uses statistics and other forms of analysis to test claims about religion and study religion's interaction with science, society, economics, and politics.

Daniel C. Dennett is University Professor, Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy, and codirector of the Center for Cognitive Studies and Tufts University. His books include *Breaking the Spell* (Viking, 2006).

Darren Sherkat is the chair of the Sociology Department at Southern Illinois University, Carbondale, where he researches the sociology of religion, including religion's correlations with education and verbal abilities.

Linda LaScola, a clinical social worker and psychotherapist, is president of LaScola Qualitative Research. LaScola collaborated with Dennett on a paper about closeted atheist ministers in *Evolutionary Psychology*.