

Science says atheists should come out of the closet for their own good

Examiner.com - Atheism and culture, January 29, 2013, By: William Hamby



Scholarly attention to the problem of discrimination against atheists has increased significantly over the last couple of years. Some of the results offer concrete answers to questions that have divided the atheist community, often bitterly. For example, there has been considerable debate over whether atheists should "come out" and live openly as atheists, or adopt a more "live and let live" policy of non-disclosure. According to a 2011 study published in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, the answer is "come out" (Gervais, 2011). That is, come out if you would prefer to live in a less discriminatory society.

The idea actually runs contrary to a "common sense" reading of the literature on discrimination. Negative attitudes towards outgroups generally tend to increase as the perceived outgroup population increases. That is, if we feel negatively towards Blacks or Hispanics, we will feel more negatively if we find ourselves confronted with more of them. The accepted explanation for this is that negative attitudes towards these groups are based on fear. Whites fear Blacks and Hispanics; English Protestants fear Irish Catholics, and so on. For atheists, it appears to be different because the root causes of discrimination are different.

Two recent studies have demonstrated that discrimination against atheists is based on distrust, not fear. The difference is subtle, but very important. In America, prejudice against Blacks and Hispanics is driven by fear of personal safety, and to a lesser extent, fear of property loss. This fear is often reinforced by the media, which is keen to report on rampant gang problems and crime waves in urban areas. We are also reminded that property values tend

Science says atheists should come out of the closet for their own good

Examiner.com - Atheism and culture, January 29, 2013, By: William Hamby

to decline as "unwanted" elements move into previously White neighborhoods. Neighborhood watches are often expressions of this very fear, as the tragic case of Trayvon Martin illustrates. The natural extension of this fear is the belief that if there are more of "them" around, our lives and property are more at risk.

Prejudice against atheists is a more generalized feeling of moral distrust. In other words, if you were to ask a hundred random Christians what specific things atheists do, you wouldn't get a lot of agreement. Instead, you would hear that they are generally immoral, lead lives of depraved sexuality, or other such vagaries. This is also reflected in the media, which often portrays atheists negatively (as in the World Trade Tower Memorial debate), but rarely if ever points to any specific crimes committed by atheists. When surveyed, Christians often say that atheists do not share the "American vision." But exactly how they are deviating from this vision is seldom expressed, save for their rejection of Christianity.

From these observations, researchers proposed a hypothesis: If Christians were to realize just how many atheists there really are, their conceptions of atheists would be challenged, since so many of their neighbors -- and often dear friends -- are secretly atheist. The direct evidence that their friends, neighbors, trusted employees, and beloved family members are not immoral or untrustworthy might well soften their opinions.

Across four different studies, this hypothesis proved spectacularly true. After controlling for relevant confounding variables, the evidence was clear. When prejudiced religious people come to believe that atheists are very common, their opinion of atheists shifts away from distrust towards more acceptance.

These findings are likely to cause some exuberance among highly visible atheist groups such as American Atheists, which frequently engages in public awareness campaigns, posts prominent ads in metropolitan areas, and whose leaders make frequent TV appearances. Of course, there is still the question of whether all publicity is good publicity. It's certainly possible that some kinds of ads have a detrimental effect on public opinion. Then again, the "visibility effect" might outweigh the "content effect." More research is necessary.

On the other hand, the message for individual "closet atheists" is remarkably clear. By doing nothing other than publicly identifying as atheists, they can play a valuable part in reducing anti-atheist prejudice nationwide. Even "indirect coming out" is likely to be helpful. For instance, if enough atheists register with the Atheist Census, those numbers could prove to be a powerful indicator of just how common we really are.

This is potentially a very exciting time to be an atheist. With a desperate and increasingly defiant Republican Congress escalating religious hatefulness towards women and gays, with the first president to acknowledge our existence, and now with powerful scientific evidence that the best thing we can do for ourselves is to simply live openly, we stand poised to accomplish real social revolution without all the awful things that accompanied previous social equality movements. Maybe we can do this without the protests, the violence, and the social upheaval of the Equal Rights Movement or Stonewall. Maybe as more and more of us come out, it will become more and more apparent that the Extremist Christian Right are the ones whose morality and trustworthiness should be questioned. Maybe we'll start asking each other why they hate us so much when it's obvious that we're just ordinary folks who live next door.

Source: Gervais, W. M. (2011) Finding the Faithless: Perceived Atheist Prevalence Reduces Anti-Atheist Prejudice. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 37(543).

<http://www.examiner.com/article/science-says-atheists-should-come-out-of-the-closet-for-their-own-good>