

Chapter 25. Atheists have an image problem.

We show not only that atheists are less accepted than other marginalized groups but also that attitudes toward them have not exhibited the marked increase in acceptance that has characterized views of other racial and religious minorities over the past forty years. . . . Americans are less accepting of atheists than of any of the other groups we asked about, and by a wide margin.¹ University of Minnesota study of atheists as “other.”

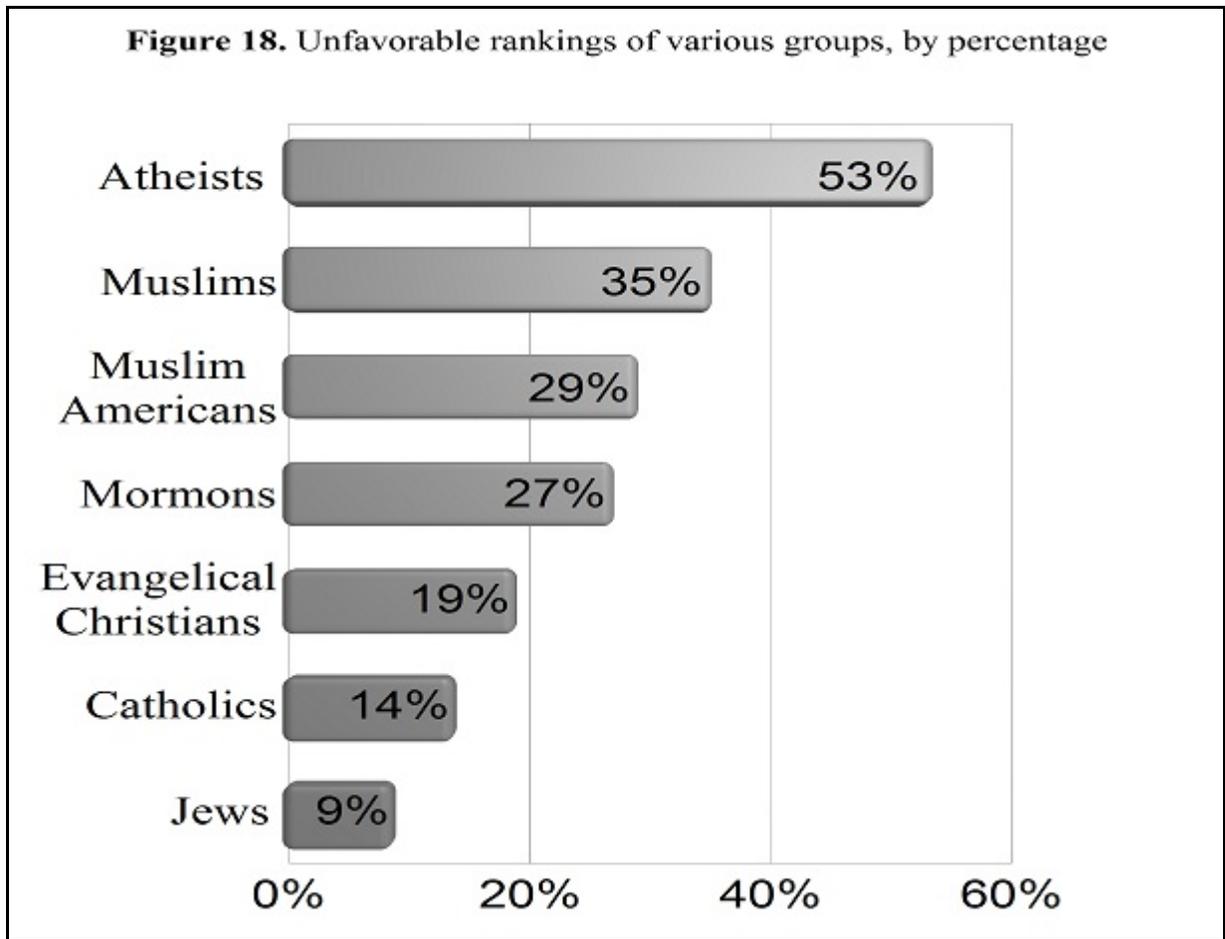
Atheism has always been hostile to religion, such as in its arguments that freedom of or for religion should include freedom from religion. Atheism’s threat rises as its proponents grow in numbers and aggressiveness. . . . [A]theism’s spokesmen are aggressive [and] have developed great skills in demonizing those who disagree with them, turning their opponents into objects of fear, hatred and scorn.² Mormon Elder Dallin Oaks

Atheists are one of the most unpopular minorities in America. Surveys consistently show that atheists are ranked less favorably than any religious group in America.³ Atheists are rated 18 points *below* Muslims, who are in the public eye because of the 9/11 attacks, their treatment of women and their superlegal attacks on cartoonists who draw Mohammed. Atheists are ranked 26 points *below* Mormons, who only 152 years ago stood off the American Army, who only outlawed polygamy in 1890, and who only allowed Blacks to become ministers in 1978. Atheists are ranked 39 points *below* Catholics, who still will not allow women to be church leaders, who deny members access to birth control and who are rocked by child-abuse cover-up scandals (Figure 18). Answering the question, “This group does not at all agree with my vision of American society,” atheists are rated the highest, named by 39.6% of respondents, followed by Muslims at 26.3% and gays at 22.6%. In a similar vein, 47.6% of respondents would disapprove of their child marrying an atheist, while only 33.5% would disapprove of marrying a Muslim.⁴ Think of that, Muslims conducted:

- the 9/11 attacks in the United States which killed almost 3,000,
- train bombings in Spain that killed 191 and wounded 1,800,
- subway bombings in England that killed 52 and injured 700,
- an assault in Mumbai, India that killed 173 and injured 308,

and yet Americans think more highly of Muslims than they do of atheists.

On one hand, these statistics are shocking because atheists are not committing suicide bombings or massive criminal acts. As an atheist, I am inclined to ask the general population, “what has an atheist done to hurt you?” But on the other hand, consider how threatened the religionists must feel by someone who tells the truth. The Muslim merely tells the Christian that his version of god is incorrect. The atheist tells all religionists that their gods are lies.



The atheist threatens the religionist's belief system and strangely enough is more feared than a coreligionist who threatens the religionist's life.

Researchers at the University of Minnesota explored the phenomena of why atheists are so despised and commented:

Some people view atheists as problematic because they associate them with illegality, such as drug use and prostitution--that is, with immoral people who threaten respectable community from the lower end of the status hierarchy. Others saw atheists as rampant materialists and cultural elitists that threaten common values from above--the ostentatiously wealthy who make a lifestyle out of consumption or the cultural elites who think they know better than everyone else. Both of these themes rest on a view of atheists as self-interested individualists who are not concerned with the common good.⁵

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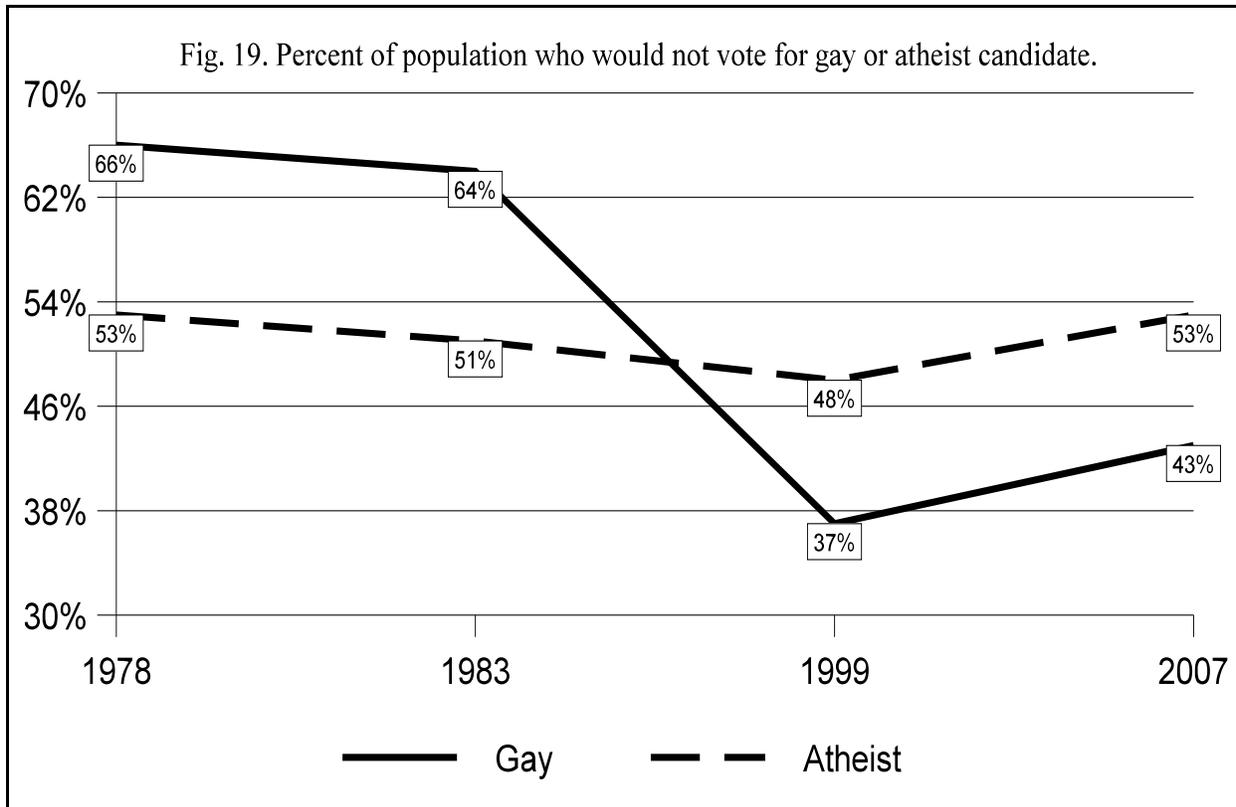
To be an atheist in such an environment is not to be one more religious minority among many in a strongly pluralist society. Rather, Americans construct the atheist as the symbolic representation of one who rejects the basis for moral solidarity and cultural membership in American society altogether. Over our history, other groups have, perhaps, been subject to similar moral concerns. Catholics, Jews, and communists all have been figures against which the moral contours of American culture and citizenship have been imagined. We suggest that today, the figure of the atheist plays this role.⁶

The atheist image problem is also reflected in the gap between the number of people who say they do not believe in god and the number who call themselves atheists. Five to ten percent of Americans say they do not believe in god, yet only .7 to 1.6% of Americans identify themselves as atheists. There are powerful disincentives to self-identifying as an atheist. The negative image of atheism is likely a major factor in the disparity between the number of those who do not believe in god and the number of those who call themselves atheists.

Over the years, poll takers have asked the public if a presidential candidate were otherwise well qualified but belonged to a certain group, would you vote for him or her? During the most recent presidential election, the results were as follows:⁷

Group	Percent who would refuse to support
Catholic	4%
Black	5%
Jewish	7%
Woman	11%
Hispanic	12%
Mormon	24%
Homosexual	43%
Atheist	53%

Although gays were the lowest on the scale for years, recently they have gained more public approval, leaving atheists in dead last place. Figure 19 shows that while gays were ranked about 10% lower than atheists in the 70's and 80's, they improved by 20 percentage points



in recent years, leaving atheists with a 10% lower approval rating than gays for the past two decades. Figure 19 also shows that atheists have done little to change their perception by the general public. Disapproval of atheists was 53% in 1978 and 53% in 2007. In contrast, gays have made great strides, dropping from a disapproval rating of 66% in 1978 to 43% in 2007. Obviously, the gay rights movement knows something that atheists do not. The next chapter looks at what the atheist movement can learn from the gay rights movement.

Among atheists, the fear of prejudice and discrimination is real. Atheists are excluded from membership and leadership roles in organizations like the Boy Scouts of America⁸ and the Salvation Army.⁹ Atheists can also be excluded from employment in programs financed through the government's "faith-based initiatives."¹⁰ Even Census workers are administered an oath ending with the religious promise, "so help me god."¹¹

Discrimination against atheists surfaces in child custody cases. For example in overturning a trial court's transfer of sole custody to the nonreligious parent and ordering continued joint custody, a Michigan Appellate court said:

[W]e find that the evidence presented below clearly preponderates against the trial court's determination that neither party displayed a greater capacity and

disposition to continue [the child's] religious upbringing. There was ample testimony that defendant regularly took [the child] to church and Sabbath school, taught [the child] how to pray and read him Bible stories, while plaintiff testified that she did not regularly attend church and presented no evidence demonstrating any willingness or capacity to attend to religion with [the child]. Thus, the trial court should have found that the disposition to continue [the child's] religious upbringing weighed in favor of defendant.¹²

Atheist children are regularly subjected to cruel treatment by their religious peers.¹³ Atheists in the military face systematic discrimination.¹⁴ While atheism precludes hiring by a few employers such as the Boy Scouts and the Salvation Army, it subtly affects the work environment and promotion opportunities in countless others. Atheist-owned small businesses risk losing customers if their disbelief is publicized. Atheists are excluded from recovery programs like Alcoholics Anonymous which require belief in a “higher power,” and also face a dilemma when, for example, court sentencing programs offer AA programs as an alternative to imprisonment. Atheists are largely ignored by the media and the media provides few positive atheist role models.

However, considering the breadth and depth of public sentiment against atheists, it is surprising that there are not more reported cases of discrimination. One explanation may be that Americans take seriously the phrase “freedom of religion” and control their prejudices in the workplace and the marketplace. Another explanation may be that atheists are largely invisible unless they identify themselves and that they avoid self-identification in arenas where prejudice prevails. However, discrimination against atheists is not my main concern in discussing this topic—welcoming more people to identify themselves as atheists is. And from this perspective it is obvious that atheists have an image problem. That is why as few as 10% of the people who do not believe in god label themselves “atheists.”

The negative image of atheists, built and perpetuated by religionists, serves its intended function. It not only discourages religionists with soft belief from declaring themselves to be atheists, it discourages them from listening to and considering the atheist message. From a public safety perspective, atheists are a small and harmless minority, but from the perspective of perpetuating religion, they are a deadly threat. Rather than telling the truth about atheists, that we are a small minority, generally kind, intelligent and as a movement disorganized and largely ineffective, religionists tell the lie that atheists are powerful, dangerous and agents of the devil. That is how frightened they are of the atheist message. To effectively convey the atheist message we must overcome thousands of years of unchallenged myths that demonize us. If your audience is watching for the devilish horns they expect to pop from your head it is unlikely they will hear your message. To effectively convert religionists to atheists, truth must prevail over lies. A preliminary step is convincing the religionist that the atheist is not evil, is not the “other” and is a source worth trusting.¹⁵

As a primary matter, we should learn from other groups that have improved their public image. Gays are a group with many characteristics similar to atheists and the next chapter examines how we can learn from the gay rights movement.

A second strategy is to use our skills to change public perception. Probably the strongest strategy is to change the “unidentified other” the general public pictures when they think of an atheist, to a specific person. For example, Heinerman and Shupe relate that the most effective recruitment tool for Mormons is *not* the scrubbed young people riding bicycles through your neighborhood in a missionary program. The missionaries are actually being taught to distinguish themselves from the general population and to be bound tighter to the Mormon church, but they convert few. The most effective recruitment tool the Mormons use is the “home mission program.” The Mormon neighbor helps the elderly person cut the lawn, volunteers as a baby sitter, lends tools and works their way into the good graces of their neighbors in thousands of little ways, slowly introducing their status as Mormons and building interest in the Mormon church. Heinerman and Shupe recount that missionaries are effective one-tenth of one percent of the time, while the home mission technique is effective 50% of the time.¹⁶ Mormons set a goal of bringing one new person into the church a year. This is a technique that atheists, by being open, proud and helpful in our community, can utilize as well.

Finally, we cannot ignore the media. Atheist characters are largely absent from the media, just as gays were a few decades ago. But as we live more openly and call on our friends in the media to portray us accurately, our image can change.

Paid advertising can also have a positive effect. Groups like the Freedom from Religion Foundation, American Humanist Association, United Coalition of Reason and others have recently purchased billboards and bus ads with messages like:

- Imagine no religion. (Freedom from Religion Foundation)
- In good we trust. (American Humanist Association)
- Don't believe in god? You are not alone. (United Coalition of Reason)

As the atheist movement builds, we can use professionally designed and tested campaigns to convey our message. And for free, we can make up our own campaigns. The back cover of this book shows my attempt, a surfing dinosaur introducing an element of fun and calling, “Atheism is up, catch the wave!”

Atheists have an image problem. This is important to me *not* because of the effects of discrimination against atheists, we are a pretty tough lot, but because it makes the goal of spreading the atheist message more difficult. More than 50% of the American religious population should be open to the atheist message, but entrenched attitudes and powerful

religious institutions make it hard to effectively reach our audience. However, atheist action, as I describe in the upcoming chapters and which we can refine over the upcoming years, will make spreading the word easier.

1. Edgell, Penny, Gerteis, Joseph, and Hartmann, Douglas, "Atheists As 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review*, 2006, Vol. 71, at 212, 217,

<http://www.soc.umn.edu/~hartmann/files/atheist%20as%20the%20other.pdf>

2. "Religious Freedom," Official Web site of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, October 13, 2009, (subquotes and italics omitted) (cached on google)

<http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:Vt78gUDbsYMJ:newsroom.lds.org/ldsnewsroom/eng/news-releases-stories/religious-freedom+atheism+threat+religion&cd=4&hl=en&ct=clnk&gl=us>

3. "Public Opinion About Mormons," Pew Research Center, December 6, 2007,

<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/648/romney-mormon>

4. Edgell, Penny, Gerteis, Joseph, and Hartmann, Douglas, "Atheists As 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review*, 2006, Vol. 71, at 218,

<http://www.soc.umn.edu/~hartmann/files/atheist%20as%20the%20other.pdf>

5. Although I argue that the humanist approach duplicates religion and therefore is undesirable, humanists directly address the concern of religionists that atheists are self-focused and do little to forward the common good. I continue to see answering the "good without god" question an example of letting religionists call the tune, but admittedly humanists can argue that they are addressing the biggest objection religionists have about atheists and therefore are forwarding the atheist movement more than me.

6. Edgell, Penny, Gerteis, Joseph, and Hartmann, Douglas, "Atheists As 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review*, 2006, Vol. 71, <http://www.soc.umn.edu/~hartmann/files/atheist%20as%20the%20other.pdf>

7. "Some Americans Reluctant to Vote for Mormon, 72-Year-Old Presidential Candidates," Gallup News Service, February 20, 2007,

<http://www.gallup.com/poll/26611/some-americans-reluctant-vote-mormon-72yearold-presidential-candidates.aspx#1>

8. See Chapter 26.

9. "Salvation Army to Gays, Atheists, Undocumented Immigrants—'Go to Hell!'" *The Politicizer*, undated,

<http://thepolicizer.com/2009/12/10/baron-salvation-army-to-gays-atheists-undocumented-immigrants-go-to-hell/>

10. "Catholic Charities in D.C. adds hiring clause on church tenets," The Washington Post, March 13, 2010,
<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/03/12/AR2010031203969.html?hpid=sec-religion>
11. "Letter to Director of the U.S. Census Bureau," United Coalition of Reason, May 7, 2010,
http://unitedcor.org/census_letter.html
12. *Underhill v. Garcia*, Michigan Court of Appeals (unpublished), December 6, 2005,
<http://caselaw.lp.findlaw.com/data2/michiganstatecases/appeals/120605/29732.pdf>
13. "Discrimination Against Atheists The Facts," Free Inquiry Magazine, February/March 2004,
http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=downey_24_4
14. "Atheist soldier sues Army for 'unconstitutional' discrimination," CNN, July 9, 2008,
<http://www.cnn.com/2008/US/07/08/atheist.soldier/index.html>; "Army to EO Reps: 'Discrimination Against Atheists OK,'" American Chronicle, April 29, 2007,
<http://www.americanchronicle.com/articles/view/25659>
15. Once again, this is an area where humanists can say they are addressing the problem more directly than me. However, in the long run I believe that structuring atheism like religion is a flawed strategy. I believe that seeing atheism as a viewpoint that extends beyond religion will ultimately prove to be more effective.
16. Heinerman, John, and Shupe, Anson, *The Mormon Corporate Empire*, 1985, at 29-32.