

Chapter 5b. Names and Symbols.

Symbols.

Atheists have no single, unifying symbol by which to identify themselves. Christians use the cross and now almost as frequently, the Jesus fish. Jews have the Star of David. Muslims have the crescent moon and star. Atheists are still searching. Perhaps the difficulty selecting a symbol is understandable, what do you use to represent a non-belief?

American Atheists.

One of the oldest symbols is from American Atheists. The organization was founded in 1963 by Madalyn Murray O’Hair¹ and adopted an “atomic whirl” with an A inside as shown in Figure 3. Surprisingly, the open whirl is supposed to represent the “A” for atheism, while the printed “A” inside comes from the first letter of the country in which the organization is located,² in this case, “America.” The design of the atomic whirl seems stuck in the 1960’s, and as the copyrighted symbol of a group of just 3,000 members, it has not traveled very far. A symbol with broader recognition is more desirable.

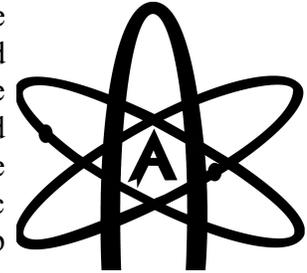


Figure 3. American Atheist symbol.

Empty Symbolism.

Perhaps focusing on the non-belief of atheists, several people have suggested symbols of a lack of belief. One suggestion is a mathematical “null set” symbol, something like this: { } or this: \emptyset . Variations on this theme include more artistic empty circles. Figure 4 contains a variation on the empty circle theme with the circle constructed of the words “AGNOSTIC, HUMANIST, RATIONALIST, FREETHINKER, SECULAR, INFIDEL, NONBELIEVER, ATHEIST, HERETIC, and GODLESS” suggested by Adrian Barnett.³



Figure 4. Circle of terms.

The circle is an interesting symbol. I saw a lot of circles appearing on cars and was impressed by the number of atheists, until I learned that the State of Oregon is using “O” for itself, as is the popular sunglass company Oakley. Unfortunately, few of the O’s I saw were atheist symbols. The empty circle has limited recognition and too much competition.

The rise of the “A.”

Because “atheist” starts with the letter “A” in many languages, some have suggested the letter “A” as an atheist symbol. Atheist author Richard Dawkins has promoted the scarlet letter A in Figure 5. Dawkins claims no copyright to the symbol which has aided its spread, particularly on the Internet.⁴



Figure 5. Dawkins’ scarlet A.

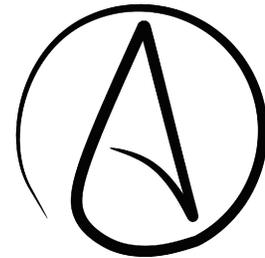


Figure 6. Atheist Alliance International A.

The Atheist Alliance International had a competition and selected a stylized “A” as their symbol as well,⁵ as shown in Figure 6. There are a

number of variations on the “A” design, including ones that look like a symbol for the *Star Trek* television and movie shows. Besides invoking unpleasant memories of reading *The Scarlet Letter* in school, recognition of the “A” symbol is limited to mostly organizational atheists. A more effective symbol would be one recognized by both insiders and outsiders.

Fishy Business.

The Christian fish symbol, which I call the “Jesus fish,” is one of the most recognized religious symbols in America. The “Darwin fish” adopts the outline of the Jesus fish, but adds legs and the word “Darwin” in the middle. Now in the public domain, it was the subject of a lawsuit between creators Al Shekel and John Edwards, who used it on atheist materials in the early 1980’s, and Chris Gilman who began making silver car ornaments with a similar design in 1990.⁶

Variations on the Darwin fish include one with the word “evolve” in the center (thereby avoiding deifying Darwin) and a tool in its hand, another with the word “science” at its center, as well as a fish made only of bones. The best of the species, from my point of view, is a fish with legs and the word “atheist” in the middle, as shown in Figure 7. This clarifies that the user not only supports evolution (which many religionists also support) but also that the user rejects religion.

Religionists responded to the Darwin fish with a compound symbol of a Jesus fish labeled “truth” eating a Darwin fish. Ring of Fire Enterprises created a symbol of a dinosaur eating a Jesus fish in response (Figure 8) as well as developing a Darwin fish copulating with a Jesus fish. Part of the humor of the dinosaur is that religious fundamentalists have a hard time objecting to the symbol since many do not believe in dinosaurs. The Darwin fish is currently well recognized, but does not apply exclusively to atheists. Replacing the word “Darwin” with “atheist” makes it a strong atheist symbol.

Humanists.

Humanists worldwide have adopted the “happy humanist” symbol, first designed in 1965.⁷ It is a stylized person standing with arms up-stretched (Figure 9). It has gained fairly good recognition among humanists and atheists, but is not widely recognized outside of those groups.

Figure 9.
The happy humanist.

The flying spaghetti monster.

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster was introduced in a 2005 letter by Bobby



Figure 7. Atheist fish.



Figure 8. Fish eating dinosaur. (Figure 8 appears courtesy of evolvefish.com, which sells this image online.)

Henderson to the Kansas School Board suggesting that “pastafarianism” be taught along with creationism. After all, there is as much evidence supporting the flying spaghetti monster as there is for god.⁸

The flying spaghetti monster spoof spread quickly, mostly among younger people, who display the flying spaghetti monster symbol on their cars or clothes.

The flying spaghetti monster is a fun way to counter religion; however, the church of the flying spaghetti monster is an in-group joke. Religionists and the majority of the population are unaware of the meaning of the googly eyes and noodly appendages of the creature (Figure 10). It gets a laugh from those “in the know” but misses the mark when it comes to educating the uninitiated as to the merits of non-religion.

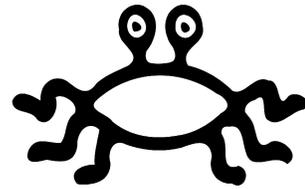


Figure 10. The flying spaghetti monster.

A rock solid symbol.

All of the symbols here are two-dimensional representations for use on cars and clothes. Since this is my book and I can say what I like, I suggest a stone cairn as a three-dimensional representation of atheism (Figure 11). Cairns are stacks of rocks used to show a trail or simply built in celebration. Cairns have been used to show the way for tens of thousands of years (well before “people of the book” admit the world was created). The top two stones of the cairn form a figurative “A,” and cairns can be created anywhere to let others know an atheist has passed before. Rocks are everywhere (just like atheists). You can put a cairn in front of your house, on the trail when hiking, and even in front of the neighborhood church!



Figure 11. A simple stone cairn.

But enough of my attempt at originality. I believe the most easily recognized symbol of atheism is simply the full word “ATHEIST.” It may not be very artistic, but it gets the message across to the largest number of people in the easiest manner (Figure 12). A slightly more interesting choice is the atheist variation of the Darwin fish shown in Figure 7. It creates a bit of humor, is visually interesting and clearly communicates that the person displaying the symbol is without religion. Between the two, I favor slightly the atheist fish.

ATHEIST

Figure 12. A plain atheist symbol.

1. “About American Atheists,” American Atheists, undated, <http://atheists.org/about>
2. “AA Logo,” American Atheists, undated, http://atheists.org/about/AA_Logo
3. “Atheist symbols,” Religious Tolerance.org, November 11, 2009, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/atheist6.htm>
4. “The Out Campaign,” outcampaign.org, undated, <http://outcampaign.org/blogroll>
5. “New Atheist Symbol,” Friendly Atheist, October, 23, 2007, <http://friendlyatheist.com/2007/10/23/new-atheist-symbol/>

6. "Parodies of the ichthys symbol," Wikipedia, May 10, 2010,
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Darwin_fish
7. "Origins of the Happy Human Symbol," Humanists of Utah, February 1996,
<http://www.humanistsofutah.org/1996/artfeb96.htm>
8. "Welcome to the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster," Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, undated, <http://www.venganza.org/>