

## Acceptance and Atheism: Why Can't We All Just Get Along

Amedee Martella

My name is Amedee Martella and I am a freshman majoring in Evolutionary Biology and Philosophy, minoring in Religious Studies. The title of my talk is "Acceptance and Atheism: Why Can't We All Just Get Along."

I would like to start off by defining atheism. Atheism is a disbelief in the existence of deity. Many people are confused by the terms atheism and agnosticism. To clarify, an atheist is a person who does not believe in a supreme being or beings, while an agnostic is unwilling to have a definite opinion on his or her belief in a supreme being or beings. In other words, an atheist would say, "I don't believe there is a god" while an agnostic might say "there might be a god, or there might not be; I really can't say."

U.S. statistics show that in the 1990s, the "nones," or those who are not affiliated with a particular religion, made up 6% of the population. In 2008, the percentage rose to 16% and in 2010, the percentage rose to 18%. The most up to date statistics are for 2012—19% of Americans consider themselves to be "nones" and about 5% consider themselves to be atheist or agnostic.

Atheism is rising in our country. As the number of individuals claiming to be atheists rises, we begin to see and hear them in our public forum. Because atheists are more vocal,

people in the general population begin to develop stereotypes about them. Some of these common stereotypes include: an atheist is someone who loves biology, has long hair which declares homage to monkey ancestors, or sports a soul patch to compensate for lack of a real soul. An atheist is a mind-controlled, baby-eating monster, hell-bent on destroying family values. An atheist is an immoral person who threatens Christian civilization. Finally, an atheist is arrogant.

The most hated group is atheists. They face discrimination in the U.S. For example, one particular study examined the allocation of scarce medical resources. It involved 167 participants, aged 16-32. These people were asked to decide who they found most deserving of a special kidney operation. They could choose among drinkers and nondrinkers, males and females, or Christians and atheists/agnostics. Participants tended to favor Christians over atheists/agnostics. Another study examined child custody issues. It found that custody rights have been denied to parents because of their atheistic views. Many atheists have reported that they have had to endure proselytizing from hospital staff while ill; they have also been prayed for by hospital staff. 41% of atheists have been victims of discrimination in the past 5 years. Some have been harassed in school, fired from jobs, shunned by family members, and threatened with death.

A study conducted at the University of Minnesota showed that 39.6% of Americans surveyed reported that atheists do not agree with their vision of American society. Further, 47.6% of Americans surveyed reported they would disapprove if their child wanted to marry an atheist. We see many forms of discrimination at the state level. For example,

atheists cannot run for office in Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. In Article 19 Section 1 of Arkansas' constitution, it states "no person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil department of this State, nor be competent to testify as a witness in any Court." In addition, Article 1, Section 4, of Pennsylvania's state constitution notes, "no person who acknowledges the being of a God and a future state of rewards and punishments shall, on account of his religious sentiments, be disqualified to hold any office or place of trust or profit under this Commonwealth." Massachusetts' state constitution has a similar statement.

This is interesting given that the first amendment of the U.S. Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." To drive this point home even more, John Adams signed the Treaty with Tripoli, which was a treaty of peace in 1797 (with Libya). Article 11 of this treaty states, "as the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion..."

49% of Americans said they would not vote for an atheist president as noted by Gallup Politics (2011). Sam Harris noted his surprise in this statistic by saying, "...we live in a country in which a person cannot get elected president if he openly doubts the existence of heaven and hell. In our next presidential election, an actor who reads his Bible, would almost certainly defeat a rocket scientist who does not. Could there be any clearer indication that we are allowing unreason and other worldliness to govern our affairs?"

While the United States does not appear ready for an atheist president, Australia has no problem electing a prime minister who is an atheist. Julia Gillard noted, “I was brought up in the Baptist church, but during my adult life, I’ve, you know, found a different path. I’m of course a great respecter of religious beliefs, but they’re not my beliefs. I am not going to pretend a faith I don’t feel...and for people of faith, the greatest compliment I could pay to them is to respect their genuinely held beliefs and not to engage in some pretense about mine. I think it’s not the right thing.”

The general public is starting to pick up on the atheist-religion debate. It is shown now in comics in the newspapers, for example. [Summarize comics]

Why are we viewed this way? We all fear the unknown. Chris Stedman, a humanist chaplain at Harvard stated the following about the Newtown, Connecticut tragedy, “Newtown featured expressions from multiple faiths, including remarks from President Obama that reflected only a theistic perspective. A non-religious perspective was absent, and this, I think, is a problem. Especially since, in the human search to place blame for this tragedy, nontheists like me have become a target.”

We can make a change...however. Acceptance increases when people increase their familiarity with atheists. There are famous atheists among us that are celebrated for their work...people like Brad Pitt, Kiera Knightly, Daniel Radcliffe, and Jody Foster. Many people place their views on billboards appearing across the country; they are trying

to show people they are not alone if they do not believe in a god. Atheism is addressed in popular movies such as *The Ledge* and *The Invention of Lying*. Atheists are shown as good, everyday people.

Chris Stedman noted that atheists and religious people can get along; he said, “the kind of unifying, healing work that is so important after tragedies like the one in Newtown is possible only if we can find a way to see one another as allies instead of enemies, and then work together—atheist and religious alike.”

We can co-exist, appreciating all religions and nonreligions. We should celebrate cultural and religious diversity. Thank you very much.

[show slides on references]