

Atheist Discrimination in America. Real or Imagined?

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Abstract

Do atheists and nonbelievers face discrimination in America? The purpose of this research is find out if atheists/nonbelievers face a significant amount of discrimination and whether they need a civil rights movement. This research was conducted by examining existing laws that specifically target nonbelievers/atheists, polls of the attitudes of the American public about nonbelievers/atheists, as well as cases of documented discrimination. This research also considers the level of representation that atheists and nonbelievers have on both the state and federal level. This research also delves into possible reasons behind the discrimination based off prior research and the theories of well-known scholars of atheism. This research attempts to shed light on an under represented, but growing religious group. There have been several papers written on discrimination against religious minorities such as Muslims, Jews and Christians but the issues facing nonbelievers/atheists has been mostly ignored. PEW research in 2012 found that 20% of Americans are not religious and it is the fastest growing religious group in America (especially among millennials). This research has implications for the future of politics, religion and civil rights in America. The conclusion of this research found that atheists/nonbelievers face a substantial amount of discrimination. They are tied with Muslims as the most hated religious group in America, seven states specifically ban them from holding public office, there are numerous reports of discrimination based off disbelief, and the American public holds mostly negative views on nonbelievers/atheists. The reason behind this conclusion could potentially be because of under representation, prejudices by the dominate religious group, and political/social norms.

Keywords: Atheist, atheism, discrimination, civil rights, politics, religion

1. Introduction

This research intends to answer the question on whether non-believers face a significant amount of discrimination in America. For the purpose of this research, non-believers is a broad category that encompasses several different types of disbelief in a god or deity. Those types are atheist, agnostic, and non-religious. Atheists reject the idea of a god or higher power. Agnostics question the existences of a higher power or god and non-religious may just see themselves as having no religion. Some individuals may be spiritual, but the main characteristic of these individuals is their rejection of the major Abrahamic religions.

As of 2012 PEW Research reports that 22.8% of Americans can be classified as not religious.¹ A 2014 study by PEW found that 7% consider themselves atheist or agnostic². Among Millennials (born between 1981-1996) 35% report that they are not religious.² Non-believers are also the fastest growing religious group in America.³

2. American Attitudes

PEW Research conducted a poll of American attitudes towards religious groups in 2014.² They asked respondents to rate their feelings towards certain groups using a scale of 1-100, with one being the most negative feelings and 100 being the most positive. The mean scores were then graphed and analyzed. The average score given to atheists was 41. This was the second lowest score of all groups, with Muslims having the lowest score by one point. 40% of respondents rated atheists as their lowest group. Evangelical Christians gave atheists the lowest score of all groups asked with a score of 25. The research was then reconducted in January of 2017 and found that atheists' score had moved up to 50 but they remained the second lowest group.⁴

A study done by the University of Minnesota surveyed respondents' attitudes towards non-believers. Two of their key findings were that 47.6% would not approve of their child marrying an atheist and 39.5% said that atheists were the group most opposed to their vision of America.⁵ Another study by the University of British Columbia and the University of Oregon reported respondents distrust atheists as much as rapists.⁶

Americans have a negative view of people who do not believe in God. They are often viewed as threatening or 'un-American' as several different studies and surveys have consistently shown. Atheism is a deviation from the norm in America and this deviation is clearly viewed in a negative light.

3. Politics

At the time of this writing (June 2017) there are zero admitted non-believers serving in the United States Congress.⁷ There is one registered as unaffiliated, but their specific beliefs are not listed. The United States has never had an admitted non-believer as president or vice president. There are also no non-believers on the Supreme Court. In fact, a 2014 poll by PEW Research found that 53% of those polled said they would not vote for an atheist.⁸ Those polled said they would prefer someone who used marijuana or cheated on their spouse before an atheist.

Among the major political parties, it was found that republicans view atheists and Muslims more negatively than any other religious groups.¹ In fact, a belief in God seems to be necessary for a successful political campaign, despite the separation of church and state.

There is a serious lack of representation for non-believers in politics, despite making up about a fifth of the country. At the same time, religious lobbying has increased five-fold since 1970 (spending about \$390 a year).⁹

Religion is very much an intricate part of both the political and judicial system in America. The National Prayer Breakfast is a Washington DC tradition that many high profile political leaders attend and in 2014 Phil Robertson gave the following speech which depicts the rape and murder of an atheist family.

I'll make a bet with you. Two guys break into an atheist's home. He has a little atheist wife and two little atheist daughters. Two guys break into his home and tie him up in a chair and gag him, and then they take his two daughters in front of him and rape both of 'em and then shoot him and say, "Isn't it great that I don't have to worry about being judged?" There's no right or wrong. And then you take a sharp knife and take his manhood and hold it in front of him and say, "Wouldn't it be something if [there] was something wrong with this?" But you're the one who says there's no God, there's no right, there's no wrong...so we're just having fun. We're sick in the head, have a nice day. - Phil Robertson, National Prayer Breakfast 2014

This statement is a troubling one, especially given the audience. The disdain for atheism is quite clear in the statement.

There is a large potential voting block of non-believers, given their numbers in America, yet politicians are very hesitant to appeal to them directly. The religious voting block is often pandered to and politicians actively fight for the so called 'Evangelical vote', but ignore the non-religious.

4. Laws and Practices

Seven states specifically prohibit atheists and non-believers from holding public offices. Those states are Arkansas, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas.¹⁰ As of this writing, those laws are still part of the state constitution. The laws are as follows:

No person who denies the being of a God shall hold any office in the civil departments of this State, nor be competent to testify as a witness in any Court. – Arkansas, Article 19, Section 1

That no religious test ought ever to be required as a qualification for any office of profit or trust in this State, other than a declaration of belief in the existence of God; nor shall the Legislature prescribe any other oath of office than the oath prescribed by this Constitution. – Maryland, Article 37

No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office in this state. – Mississippi, Article 14, Section 265

The following persons shall be disqualified for office: Any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God. – North Carolina, Article 6, Section 8

No person who denies the existence of a Supreme Being shall hold any office under this Constitution. – South Carolina, Article 17, Section 4

No person who denies the being of God, or a future state of rewards and punishments, shall hold any office in the civil department of this state. – Tennessee, Article 9, Section 2

No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this State; nor shall any one be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being. – Texas, Article 1, Section 4

In Arkansas, atheists are banned from testifying in court.¹¹ These laws however are rarely if ever enforced because they would clearly violate the separation of church and state. They are still on the books, none of which have been successfully challenged.

NPR reported in 2011 that the Army required soldiers to take a ‘Spiritual Fitness test’.¹² This test was based on psychological research that spiritual beliefs helped soldiers cope with fighting and war. Soldiers were required to take this test which threatened to expose non-believers as such. One question was reported by a soldier, named Justin Griffith, asked, “*In difficult times, I pray or meditate*”.¹² He alleged that because his answer would be no, and other questions like it, that he would be exposed as an atheist (which he admits to NPR that he is).

In response to the test, Griffith’s assessment was that he needed to improve his spiritual fitness. While the Army never explicitly stated that due to his lack of belief he was unfit to serve, but a clear message was sent; religious belief makes a better soldier.

5. Cases of Discrimination

There are numerous cases of discrimination based on non-belief. This discrimination is felt in many different ways. There have been reports and alleged reports of religious parents being given preferences over the non-religious spouse in child custody cases.⁶ The courts saw that religion would be a positive influence in the child’s life, which among other factors was part of the decisions involving custody. Atheist groups have been denied the ability to have clubs, billboards and posters.¹³

In Annville, PA an atheist veteran group was booed and told to leave at a Memorial Day parade.¹³ The Boy Scouts of America ban atheists from joining, and the ACLU in Mississippi rejected a money donation by an atheist group. They released a statement that read “*Although we support and understand organizations like yours, the majority of Mississippians tremble in terror at the word atheist*”.^{13 14}

There have been many other cases, and like other types of discrimination it can be hard to prove. The problem with discrimination is that a multitude of other factors could be to blame as well. When the statistics on American beliefs

towards atheists are considered as well though, it becomes more likely that disbelief could play a part in cases of discrimination.

There is often an exclusion of non-believers in America. Especially in times of distress or crisis it is the norm in America to embrace religion, God and pray. While this type of language does not seek out the exclusion of non-believers it nonetheless ends a message that they are somehow not part of America. After the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in 2001, Natalie Angier wrote a piece in *New York Times Magazine* about the Bush years called “Confessions of a Lonely Atheist” these were her thoughts on then President-elect Bush’s acceptance speech,¹⁵

The only problem was what President-elect Bush wanted from me and “every American.” “I ask you to pray for this great nation,” he said. “I ask your prayers for leaders from both parties,” and for their families too, while we’re at it. Whatever else I might have been inclined to think of Bush’s call for comity, with his simple little request, his assumption that prayer is some sort of miracle Vicks Vapo Rub for the national charley horse, it was clear that his hands were reaching for any hands but mine.

6. Misinformation

Misinformation plays a key role in the discrimination of non-believers. Some misinformation may be intentional, such as churches teaching fear of non-believers. Atheism is often associated with communism because of the Soviet Union’s embrace of atheism and rejection of religion. During the Cold War atheism and communism were linked in the minds of Americans and that link is still prevalent today.¹⁶

The Secular Student Alliance compiled a list of common myths about atheists. People often assume that due to a lack of belief in God and the Bible that atheists have no moral compass. That also leads to a sense that those who do not believe in God are alien. There is also the myth that atheists worship Satan.¹⁷

In the media, atheists or non-believers are often shown in a negative light. The movie *God’s Not Dead* casts the ‘evil’ character as the mean atheist professor. In the show *House M.D.*, the main character, Dr. House, an admitted atheist, is a deeply flawed and bitter individual. Sometimes it’s not as obvious, like in the show *Bones* where the main character Dr. Brennan is an atheist. One of the trademarks of her character is that she is socially awkward and unable to connect to other people. She only learns how to show emotions and relate to other people because of her love interest, Booth, who is a devout catholic. This subliminal message is not noticeable on the surface but serves the negative stereotype that atheists are strange, alien, and flawed people.

Atheists may be reluctant to admit their disbelief or hide it to avoid negative consequences. Because of this, many people don’t realize that they know atheists and so often this misinformation is not corrected and instead is perpetuated throughout the culture of America. To prove this Will Gervais and Maxine Najle, psychologists at the University of Kentucky, did a study using what is referred to as an ‘unmatched count technique’. Instead of asking people directly if they believed in God they were asked to read a list of statements and say how many about them were true. The researchers had matched the group so that they should respond the same, except for one statement, “I believe in God.” The results showed a higher number of nonbelievers than previously reported.¹⁸

7. Christian Privilege

Much like other forms of privilege (such as white, male, heterosexual, or cis-gendered privilege), Christian privilege is often hidden and unconscious. It is the result of a culture where the majority of people (71%) are Christian.¹⁹ Being Christian in America is seen as normal, while being anything else is seen as other or not normal. It is generally seen as a good thing, by most, to be Christian or at least it is not seen as bad. Christian holidays are often national holidays, while other religions’ holidays are not.

91% of Congress as of 2017 is Christian and religion is often used in politics.^{7, 20} Therefore, being Christian often benefits individuals. The fact that this is unconscious strengthens its power. This is an important point, because when privilege goes unchecked and unnoticed it is often harmful for those without it. Christianity will probably be the dominate religion in America for a long time to come, but it is important to understand the effects of Christian privilege.

8. Discussion

When taken together, the factors laid out in this research show a pattern of discrimination against non-believers in America. It is because of this that atheism needs a civil rights movement like those for LGBTQ people, African Americans, women, Muslims, and other marginalized groups. While the discrimination faced by other groups may be greater in magnitude that does not mean non-believers shouldn't fight for equality. The culture of America that rejects non-believers will take time to change, but there are steps forward.

Education about atheists and disbelief is perhaps the most important step. Correcting the negative stereotypes and misinformation will start to change the negative views towards non-believers. People need to see that non-believers are normal people who are just like their religious counterparts. Atheist outreach into communities could also start to change those negative beliefs.

Non-believers should run for public offices and gain representation in local, state, and federal government. Representation is crucial to make sure that the rights of non-believers are not violated and their interests are brought into the political sphere. The discriminatory laws must be challenged and removed from the books. Banning atheists from holding public office violates the US Constitution.

Religious Americans who hold negative views towards non-believers should be encouraged to challenge their views. Other people should challenge derogatory views against non-believers when they encounter them. Non-believers should also be encouraged to be open about their disbelief. PEW Research found that when a respondent reported knowing an atheist they gave them a more positive rating than those who did not know any.¹ Atheism and disbelief needs to be normalized so that it is not something that is feared.

Finally, the separation of church and state must be respected. It not only prevents one religion from dominating politics and law making but protects non-believers.

9. Conclusion

This research was intended to make a case that atheists and non-believers are discriminated against in America. Several different factors were analyzed, and they include attitudes towards atheists, discriminatory laws and traditions, misinformation, lack of political influence and the effects of Christian privilege. It is through these arguments that we find evidence that non-believers face a significant amount of discrimination in America. This discrimination is akin to that faced by other marginalized groups such as homosexuals, transgendered individuals, women, African Americans, Muslims, the disabled, and many others. It would be reasonable to suggest that non-believers follow in the footsteps of other groups and demand a civil rights movement to fight against discrimination.

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