

# A Challenge

## COME OUT OF THE CLOSET

# to Atheists

Richard Dawkins

**I**n 1987, a reporter asked George Bush Sr. whether he recognized the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are atheists. Mr. Bush's reply has become infamous: "No, I don't know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots."

To see how outrageous this is, try substituting "Jews" for "atheists." Bush's bigoted remark was not an isolated mistake, blurted out in the heat of the moment and later retracted. He and his spokesmen stood by it in the face of repeated calls for clarification or withdrawal.<sup>1</sup> He really meant it. And knew that it posed no threat to his election. Quite the contrary, it is universally accepted that an admission of atheism would be instant political suicide for any presidential candidate.

The devout Joe Lieberman, who said something a little similar though less scandalous,<sup>2</sup> was presumably added to Al Gore's presidential ticket in an effort to court the Jewish vote. American Jewish voters constitute a feared lobby which, if newspapers are to be believed, is responsible for the U.S.A.'s relentless support of Israel, the Jewish state whose twentieth-century intrusion into Palestine so affronted the people who already lived there. As we shall see when we look at numbers, however, it is by no means obvious why the Jewish vote is any more worth courting than the atheist vote. Except that American atheists have never got their act together and formed a proper lobby. If they did, they too could become powerful. And that is what I want to urge.

As things stand, to own up to being an atheist in America today is tantamount to introducing yourself as Adolf Beelzebub. Natalie Angier wrote a rather sad piece in the *New York Times Magazine* called "Confessions of a Lonely Atheist."<sup>3</sup> She clearly feels in a beleaguered and threatened minority, but she didn't tell the half of it. Nor did Dave Silverman, whose article, with almost the same title as mine, was brought to my attention after I had written my own.<sup>4</sup> The latest issue of the admirable *Freethought Today*<sup>5</sup> reprints hate mail received by its editor after she won a court case upholding the constitutional separation of church and state. Some typical examples follow (the style and spelling are part of the Christian charm):

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"Satan worshipping scum." "Please die and go to hell." "Hello, cheese-eating scumbags." "Their are way more of us Christians than you losers. Their is NO separation of church and state and you heathens will lose . . . I hope you get a painful disease like rectal cancer and die a slow painful death, so you can meet your God, SATAN." "Hey dude this freedom from religion thing sux. . . . So you fags and dykes take it easy and watch where you go cuz whenever you least expect it god will get you." "If you don't like this country and what it was founded on & for [What would Thomas Jefferson have said?—R.D.], get the fuck out of it and go straight to hell . . . PS Fuck you, you comunist whore." "Get your black asses out of the U.S.A." "You are without excuse. Creation is more than enough evidence of the LORD JESUS CHRIST'S omnipotent power [Why not Allah's?—R.D.]. If you think that the mathematical precision that governs the universe was established by random events then you truly are that class of IDIOT that cannot be aptly defined. We will not go quietly away. If in the future that requires violence just remember you brought it on. My rifle is loaded."

But what, after all, is an atheist? Far from having horns and a tail, an atheist is simply a person who, when thinking about such matters at all, holds a parsimonious view of the cosmos and of human nature. It is an academic matter, like favoring the Copenhagen Interpretation of quantum theory, hardly worthy of the sort of social and political ostracism that the word *atheist* almost universally provokes. In practice, an atheist is a person who feels about Yahweh the way any decent Christian feels about Thor, Baal, or the Golden Calf. As has been said before, we are all atheists about most of the gods humanity has ever believed in—some of us just go one god further. Even if we define an atheist more theoretically, as one who seeks only naturalistic explanations and believes there are no supernatural beings of any kind, this surely qualifies as the kind of academic philosophic belief that a person is entitled to hold in a civilized democracy without being vilified as an unpatriotic, unelectable noncitizen, let alone threatened with a rifle.

Nor are we numerically as weak as you might think. The U.S. Census asks no questions about religion, but in 2001 the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS), made by an authoritative team at the City University of New York, followed up the 1990 survey known as the NSRI (National Survey of Religious Identification).<sup>6</sup> It makes surprisingly encouraging reading. Christianity, of course, claims the lion's share of the population: nearly 160 million adults. But what do you think

is the second largest group, convincingly outnumbering Jews (2.8 million), Muslims (1.1 million), Hindus, Buddhists, and all other religions put together? The second largest group, numbering nearly thirty million adults, is the one described as *nonreligious* or *secular*. That figure has nearly doubled since 1990, while the number of practicing Jews decreased 10 percent during the same period. A consciousness-raising exercise that encouraged atheists to “come out” might have a massive impact on the American electorate, enough to worry the modern-day equivalents of George Bush Sr.

In terms of head counts, then, it is not obvious that a properly organized atheist lobby should have less political clout than the Jewish lobby, which it outnumbers ninefold. But when political analysts are asked why the Jewish lobby is so much stronger politically than voting numbers would suggest, they typically draw attention to such factors as wealth, influence in the media, education, and intelligence. How do atheists measure up in these departments? Neither ARIS nor NSRI break down their data by socio-economic class, educational achievement, or IQ. But a recent article by Paul G. Bell in *Mensa* magazine provides some straws in the wind.<sup>7</sup> Mensa is an international organization open only to those of high measured IQ. Not surprisingly, therefore, its magazine displays an interest in questions of intellectual ability. From a meta-analysis of the literature, Bell concludes that:

Of 42 studies carried out since 1927 on the relationship between religious belief and one’s intelligence or educational level, all but four found an inverse connection. That is, the higher one’s intelligence or education level, the less one is likely to be religious. . . .

The four exceptions didn’t show the opposite, of course. They merely failed to show statistical significance in either direction. I haven’t seen the original forty-two studies on which the meta-analysis is based, so I don’t know how reliable it is. I would like to see more studies along these lines. Incidentally, many of the brightest atheists in the country are, of course, lapsed Jews.

In 1998, Larson and Witham polled the cream of American scientists, those who have been honored by election to the elite National Academy of Sciences.<sup>8</sup> Among this select group, belief in a personal God dropped to a shattering 7 percent. About 20 percent call themselves agnostic, and the rest are atheists. When Larson and Witham broadened their sample to scientists who had *not* been elected to the National Academy, religious believers rose from 7 percent to around 40 percent. Among biological scientists elected to the National Academy, only 5.5 percent believe in a god. I have not seen corresponding figures for elite scholars in other fields such as history or philosophy, but it would be surprising if they were very different.

We have reached a truly remarkable situation, then: a grotesque mismatch between the American intelligentsia and the American electorate. A philosophical opinion about the nature of the universe, which is held by the great majority of America’s top scientists and probably by the elite intelligentsia generally, is so abhorrent to the American electorate that no candidate for popular election dare affirm it in public. If I am right, this means that high office in the greatest country in the world is barred to the very people best qualified to

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hold it, unless they are prepared to lie about their beliefs:

American political opportunities are loaded against those who are simultaneously intelligent and honest.

I am not a citizen of this country, so I hope it will not be thought unbecoming if I suggest that something needs to be done. I have already hinted at what I think that something is. We need a conscious-



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ness-raising “coming out” campaign similar to the campaign organized by homosexual activists a few years ago (although heaven forbid that we should stoop to “outing” people against their will). Those who come out will by their example destroy the myth that there is something wrong with atheists. On the contrary, they will demonstrate that atheists are the kind of people who could serve as decent role models for children . . . the kind of people an advertising agent could profitably employ to recommend a product . . . the kind of people who are listed with pride on atheist Web sites.<sup>9</sup> Their example will persuade even the hate mongers whom I quoted earlier to reserve their vitriol for worthier targets. And there should be a snowball effect: a positive feedback such that the more names we have, the more we get. There could be nonlinearities—threshold effects such that, when a critical mass has been attained, there is an abrupt acceleration in recruitment.

I suspect that the word *atheist* itself remains a stumbling block far out of proportion to what it actually means: and, importantly, a stumbling block to people who otherwise might be happy to “come out.”<sup>10</sup> *Agnostic* was preferred by Darwin himself, and not only out of loyalty to his friend Huxley who coined it. Darwin said: “I have never been an atheist in the sense of denying the existence of a God. I think that generally . . . an agnostic would be the most correct description of my state of mind.”<sup>11</sup>

He became uncharacteristically aggravated on the subject. On meeting Edward Aveling, a militant atheist who, on another occasion, failed to persuade Darwin to accept the dedication of his book on atheism,<sup>12</sup> Darwin challenged him: “Why do you call yourselves atheists?”

“Agnostic,” retorted Aveling, was simply “atheist writ respectable,” and “Atheist was simply agnostic writ aggressive.”

Darwin complained: “But why should you be so aggressive?” He went on to suggest that atheism might be well and good for the intelligentsia, but that ordinary people were not “ripe for it.”<sup>13</sup> Darwin’s attitude reminds me of those latter-day pro-evolution campaigners I have encountered, who are anxious that atheists should not rock the boat (so assiduously steadied by religious evolutionists, from the pope to Kenneth Miller<sup>14</sup>).

A friend, an intelligent lapsed Jew who observes the Sabbath for reasons of cultural solidarity, describes himself as a Tooth Fairy Agnostic. He will not call himself an atheist because it is in principle impossible to prove a negative. But “agnostic” on its own might suggest that he thought God’s existence or non-existence equally likely. In fact, though strictly agnostic about both, he considers God’s existence no more probable than the Tooth Fairy’s. Hence the phrase Tooth Fairy Agnostic. Bertrand Russell used a hypothetical teapot in orbit about Mars for the same didactic purpose. You have to be agnostic about the teapot, but that doesn’t mean you treat the likelihood of its existence as being on all fours with its non-existence. The list of things about which we strictly have to be agnostic doesn’t stop at tooth fairies and celestial teapots. It is infinite. If you want to believe in a particular one of them—teapots, unicorns, or tooth fairies, Thor or Yahweh—the onus is on you to say why you believe in it. The onus is not on the rest of us to say why we do not. We who are atheists are also a-fairyists, a-teapotists, and

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a-unicornists, but we don’t have to bother saying so.

Nevertheless, if we want to attract more nonreligious secularists to “come out” in public, we are probably going to have to find something better to stick on our banner than Tooth Fairy or Teapot Agnostic. How about Humanist? This has the advantage of a worldwide network of well-organized associations already in place. For me it suffers from apparent anthropocentrism. One of the main things we have learned from Darwin is that the human species is only one among millions of cousins, some close and some distant.

Another candidate for the banner is “(Philosophical) Naturalism.” *Natural* is chosen in opposition to *supernatural*. Ursula Goodenough, author of *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, is a nonconfrontational atheist who calls herself a “religious naturalist.” She adds *religious* because, quite rightly, she resents the hijacking by supernatural religions of the poetic sense of awe and wonder that fills the breast of any scientist worthy of the name. I have made much the same point in *Unweaving the Rainbow*, except that I prefer not to use the confusing word *religious*. I also think *naturalist* is confusing, and Darwin would surely agree. To him naturalist meant *student of nature*, an honorable title by any standards, and some of the best naturalists, from Gilbert White down, have been clergymen. Others, perhaps including the British lynch mob that last year attacked a pediatrician in mistake for a pedophile, might confuse naturalism with nudism.

Perhaps the best of the available euphemisms for atheist is *nontheist*. It lacks the connotation of positive conviction that there is definitely no god, and it could therefore easily be embraced by Teapot or Tooth Fairy Agnostics. It is less familiar than *atheist* and lacks its phobic connotations. Yet, unlike a completely new coining, its meaning is clear. If we want a euphemism at all, *nontheist* is probably the best. The alternative which I favor is to renounce all euphemisms and grasp the nettle of the word *atheism* itself, precisely because it *is* a taboo word carrying *frissons* of hysterical phobia. Critical mass may be harder to achieve than with some nonconfrontational euphemism, but if we did achieve it with the dread word *atheist*, the political impact would be all the greater.<sup>15</sup>



Notes

1. <http://www.holysmoke.org/sdhok/aa011.htm>.
2. <http://www.secularstudents.org/alliances/comreason.html>.
3. Natalie Angier, "Confessions of a Lonely Atheist," in *New York Times Magazine*, January 14, 2001, <http://www.geocities.com/mindstuff/Angier.html>.
4. Dave Silverman: "Coming Out—Atheism: the Other Closet." <http://www.atheists.org/comingout/othercloset.html>.
5. Published by the Freedom from Religion Foundation: [www.ffrf.org](http://www.ffrf.org).
6. [http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris\\_index.htm](http://www.gc.cuny.edu/studies/aris_index.htm); [http://www.adherents.com/rel\\_USA.html](http://www.adherents.com/rel_USA.html).
7. Paul G Bell, *Mensa Magazine*, February 2002, pp. 12–13.
8. E. J. Larson & L. Witham, "Leading Scientists Still Reject God," *Nature* 394 (1998): 313. See also Tom Flynn, "Unbelief Among Top Scientists Growing," *FREE INQUIRY*, Fall (1998): 16–17.
9. See <http://www.celebatheists.com/> and <http://www.visi.com/~markg/atheists.html>.
10. A bizarre story comes out of Florida as we go to press. The vice president of Atheists of Florida was ordered by the state Department of Motor Vehicles, which had received complaints from offended citizens, to remove his car license plate, which said "atheist," on the grounds that it was "obscene or objectionable." He fought the ban with the aid of the American Civil Liberties Union and, wonderful to relate, the state backed down: he has just been told that he can keep his license plate (*St. Petersburg*

*Times*, [http://www.stpetersburgtimes.com/2002/03/15/TampaBay/ATHEIST\\_tag\\_wins\\_repr.shtml](http://www.stpetersburgtimes.com/2002/03/15/TampaBay/ATHEIST_tag_wins_repr.shtml)). The initial ban and the happy ending respectively illustrate the two main points I am trying to make in this article. Atheists are victims of extraordinary prejudice in this country. But it is possible to win battles with sufficient determination.

11. [http://www.geocities.com/crinisvilla/meretricula\\_com/agnostic.html](http://www.geocities.com/crinisvilla/meretricula_com/agnostic.html).
12. This refusal, incidentally, gave rise to an urban legend that Marx had attempted to dedicate *Das Kapital* to Darwin. Aveling's mistress happened to be Karl Marx's daughter. She inherited the papers of both men, and they became confused. Darwin's polite letter of refusal to Aveling, beginning "My Dear Sir . . ." was for years wrongly thought to have been addressed to Marx. The legend was taken up in Stalin's Russia—surprisingly, since it doesn't seem to redound to Marxist credit—and is still in wide circulation. See Lewis Feuer, *Encounter*, October 1978.
13. A Desmond and J. Moore, *Darwin* (London: Michael Joseph, 1991), pp. 657–58.
14. Miller's admirable book, *Finding Darwin's God*, is one of the best attacks on creationism around, especially the "intelligent design" flavor of creationism, gaining added force from the fact that the author is devoutly religious.
15. A version of this article formed the basis of my speech to the Technology, Entertainment, Design Conference, Monterey, California, 2002.

# FOOTBALL HERO

R. Leland Waldrip

It's summer, football's only weeks from now,  
Recall January's NFC championship? Wow!  
Remember the game's hero had his say,  
A bit too pious about a game they play,  
Like, "Glory to God, His wonderful  
name,  
Thanks to Jesus, we won the game."

It's unfair with Jesus stacking the odds.  
Must teams battle Rams, also the Gods?  
And, Jesus — what kind of player, He?  
All-powerful God, omnipotent He'd  
be!

Could pass the ball from goal to goal,  
Be there to catch it before another soul,  
Elbow His way through opponent's defense,  
Leave bodies strewn from  
scrimmage hence,  
To add another six to the one-sided score,  
Exactly the same as just before,  
Then kick the ball to the one-inch line,  
Make opponents fumble time after time.  
And on and on He'd play in the game,  
'Til nobody'd know why they even came.



They'd grab their coats, mutter and leave,  
"This is the worst. I think I'll leave."

So, where did Jesus go in only one week?  
Did He abandon our hero, another seek?  
No — from Patriots no Jesus claim was heard,  
They played as a team, without a  
pious word.  
The Superbowl, of all prizes the mother,  
They won with faith — but that in each  
other.

Friends — let's use rational thought —  
Let football wars without God be fought!  
Don't claim Divine support ever again —  
God is neutral — may the best team win!

—R. Leland Waldrip is a novelist, author of *Anasazi Harvest*, *The Last Grizzly*, and other books.