

[Home](#) > [News & Opinion](#) > [Local / Regional News](#)

## Atheists love Christmas, too

By Heather V. Eng

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**W**ar, cold and a tough economy putting a damper on your holiday spirit? Try being an atheist at Christmas.

"We're still discriminated against on a regular basis," said David Silverman, national spokesman for American Atheists. "People hate me immediately; people assume I'm evil and hate religion; people assume I want to convert them."

A Harris Poll released Wednesday found 8 percent of Americans do not believe in God. Many of those atheists agree with Silverman and say Americans have an inaccurate picture of their beliefs. Some even embrace Christmas as a secular holiday that celebrates togetherness.

"I love Christmastime - getting together with friends and family, focusing on life and loving each other," said John Horner, a jazz musician and atheist who lives in Brookline. "I think that's a very strong message, and you don't have to be religious to feel that."

Yet this year, Christian conservatives have accused non-believers of being behind the so-called "War on Christmas." Last month, the Rev. Jerry Falwell launched a crusade against cities - including Boston - that used the term "holiday tree" instead of "Christmas tree." His organization also has attacked retailers who decked their stores in "Happy Holidays" signs rather than ones that read "Merry Christmas."

Humbug, say atheists. "It's not like I have a chip on my shoulder and sneer at every Christmas sign," said Zachary Bos, organizer of the Boston Atheists.

"I'm glad to respect other traditions, but I'm just as happy to take ownership of this time of year, lay claim to this sense of goodwill and say that you don't need to be operating in a religious tradition to take part and celebrate," he added.

Bos remembers attending Christmas church services while growing up.

"I was enthralled by the pageantry, the music, the greenery," Bos, 24, said. "And most of all by the social unity, the community spirit and this wonderful display of freely given goodwill and cheer. It had very little to do with the fact that it was Christ's Mass in honor of his birth. And I feel very much the same way today."

Other atheists also have taken part in Christmas traditions without incorporating the religious component.

"When I was young and had children we had a Christmas tree, but there was nothing religious about it," said Michael Martin, a lifelong atheist, retired professor of philosophy at Boston University and author of several books about atheism. "We do have Christmas dinner, but there's nothing religious about it."

Bos says he gives his friends gifts and has gone caroling in the past.

"I'm not ashamed to say I'm atheist around Christmas," he said. "I'm not trying to pick a fight with anyone. . . . This is not the season for fighting."



Zach Bos, organizer of the Boston Atheists, strings up lights at his Brookline apartment. (Staff photo by Tim Correira)