

Organized non-religion

Feeling buried within a religious society, many atheists, including some in Boston, have banded together in regional and national associations to have their voices heard, wield some power and make like-minded friends

By Marlesse Marino



Though atheist no longer face the same ghastly fates as their predecessors — who were as they were dragged to government-sanctioned death or pummeled with stones by crowds of jeering zealots — atheists say the cultural biases and discrimination they continue to face has led many to organize for resistance and empowerment.

"It is a tough time for atheists to be out," said Atheist Alliance International President Margaret Downey. "Survey after survey has revealed that atheists are the most hated, most misunderstood, most negatively stereotyped group in America.

According to a 2003 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, only 34 percent of Americans surveyed had a "mostly favorable" view of atheists, while 50 percent said they would refuse to vote for an atheist for public office.

"Surveys have shown that no one would vote for an atheist politician, if an atheist even got that far," Downey said. "We are maligned and harassed if it is discovered that we are atheists. [Organized atheism] allows us to have a community where we feel safe."

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

While atheists neither pray, proselytize or wake up early each weekend to attend services, many around the country say they have united in their rejection of the supernatural aspects of religion. They also say they have organized to affect change in their areas and become vital — and visible — parts of their communities, often hosting regular meetings in addition to operating atheist centers and radio stations.

"Some [atheists] don't know any other atheists except for the atheists they meet in a group, so they like to organize for friendship and community and social activities," said Minnesota Atheists president August Berkshire. "Atheists might get together for purely social reasons and have lunch or dinner, or have a movie night."

Achieving social and political power in a culture often prejudiced against the non-religious has also contributed to the rise in atheist organization, Berkshire said.

"To fight for separation of church and state is very hard for an individual to do, and easier for a group to do," he said. "We testify against the Minnesota legislature sometimes when a bill comes up that violates separation of church and state. Because we are organized, we can go in and represent Minnesota Atheists, hundreds of atheists, and explain why the legislation is against the constitution."

In the past few years, Minnesota Atheists has raised more than \$100,000 in an effort to purchase a building for meetings and other business. Currently, members typically meet in public libraries, which frequently results in scheduling conflicts, Berkshire said. An official home for the group will hopefully

spark a rise in attendance and enable Minnesota Atheist to attain greater influence in the community as well as a stronger sense of legitimacy among outsiders, he said.

"[The building will] gives us a physical presence in the community" Berkshire said. "It makes us look more established.

"If we have a free space, we can do more things like a single's night or a book reading," he added. "When you get a building, you are not just a ragtag group on the fringes of society. We want to be viewed as more entrenched in society."

Boston Atheists co-organizer Winfield Peterson said group members maintain their atheist identity while informally rallying around their common opposition to religion.

"There are many other [atheist groups] that try to create a much more codified charter in terms of what they are about," said Boston Atheists co-organizer Winfield Peterson. "[They] follow a philosophy or a moral code outside of religion and are much more well defined, but we try to be the alternative without a really strict definition of a unifying credo.



Evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, whose books decrying religion have sold millions of copies, poses with fellow atheists at the 2007 Atheist Alliance International convention.

"We are just a group of people outside of the church," he added. "We are just a small group of whatever. We have a lot of really smart people here who are always trying to figure out the core set of beliefs that describe all of us but I personally don't think that is possible and I don't think it would be good for the group."

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

Obtaining a place of their own does not come easily, however, said American Atheists President Ellen Johnson. While reli-



gious groups receive favorable treatment from local governments, atheists struggle to secure buildings, she said.

"American Atheists do not have a tax-exempt building, but the religious have property tax exemptions just because they are believers," Johnson said. "There are more churches in any community than there are schools and that is pretty scary . . . A lot of these churches were given property from the government or they were sold this property many decades ago.

"Religions have a lot of privileges and special rights that makes everything for them easy and when atheists don't have it, it makes everything for us difficult," she said. "We give them tax exempt property just because they have a particular [belief]."

OPPOSITION AND INDIFFERENCE

While some people may think banding together requires the group having a specific agenda or even spiritual commonalities, organization alone does not constitute a religion or a body of shared beliefs, Berkshire said.

"You cannot put [atheism] on a par with religion, because atheism has no dogma," Berkshire said. "It's a state of being like being rich or being poor. You wouldn't say being rich is a religion. If you are rich, you have money; if you are poor, you don't have money; and if you are an atheist, you don't have god belief."

Berkshire said atheism entitles an individual to do nothing in terms of meeting and sharing ideas and added that the majority of atheists shy away from organization. He said he believes that the minority of atheists who choose to organize do so for various reasons, most commonly finding friends, networking and socializing.

Despite the assertion that organization does not mean religion, some Boston University students say atheist associations do invite comparisons to organized religion.

"I have never been to an atheistic meeting and can't say I would ever be particularly interested," said College of Arts and Sciences freshman Alex Amadeo, an atheist. "I find the thought of meetings of atheists to be like attending Mass, and I think the idea of organized meetings isn't what atheism is about. Atheism is independent thought. No two atheists have the same relationship with faith. What distinguishes atheists is their lack of need for organization."

Though College of Fine Arts sophomore Katie Peterson is a member of the Facebook.com group "Atheists, Agnostics and Freethinkers," she said chooses to separate herself from atheist-centered meetings.

"I don't feel like I need to have meetings to reinforce how I feel," Peterson said. "I feel it would become too much like the way people go to church every week, too much like a religion. If it becomes a regular meeting, then it loses its individuality, which is what makes atheists so unique from other atheists and everyone else."

North Quincy resident Raja Bhattacharya, who attended his first Boston Atheists meeting last night, said he was raised as a Hindu but now rejects all religion because the "authoritative dogmas, conformist ideas and fixed moral codes made no sense."

"Atheists are not good organizers, and I don't think they should be. I reject every kind of organization: organized crime, religion and terrorism."



Attendees applaud a speaker at the 2007 Atheist Alliance International Convention. AAI is an alliance of 58 atheist organizations worldwide.

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