

January 2005

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Recommended Citation

Johnson, Joseph (2005) "To-Do List: Athiest Ally Development," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 26 , Article 9.
Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol26/iss1/9>

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To-Do List: Atheist Ally Development

Joseph Johnson

The field of student affairs is very familiar with the term ally. For most of us, we are continually working on how we can be better allies in a wide variety of identities. My passion for becoming a better ally has driven my journey through the world of student affairs. In my experience, however, there is a group that is still missing allies. As an atheist undergraduate, graduate student, and now as a professional I have met very few “out” atheists. With so small of a visible population, the need for atheist allies is great. I hope that by sharing some of my story I can encourage fellow atheists in the profession to make themselves known, as well as encourage everyone else to make efforts to become an ally for atheists.

Imagine, if you will, that you are a first-year college student and you are 600 miles from home. You are feeling good about how things have gone so far. You have made a lot of new friends, you have felt challenged by your classes but are doing very well in them, and best of all you have met someone special who you enjoy spending time with. To most eyes you appear to be a typical college student, then something happens. You and your partner turn on the television and flip through the channels, stopping briefly on CSPAN. You hear the following: “No, I don’t know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered as patriots. This is one nation under God” (Positive Atheism, 2004). This was said by Former President George Bush, Sr. Wanting to see some news, your partner turns to CNN where U.S. Navy Chaplain, Kal McAlexander, is being interviewed. Answering a question, he stated “there is no such thing as an atheist in a foxhole” (CNN, 2004).

Your partner loses interest quickly and flips down to channel 48 where you hear Pat Robertson say the following on the *700 Club*:

The Constitution of the United States is a marvelous document of self-government by Christian people. But the minute you turn the document into the hands of non-Christian people and atheist people, they can use it to destroy the very foundations of society. And that’s what’s happening. (Positive Atheism, 2004)

Not finding this episode all that intriguing, the channel is flipped to *The View* for the latest gossip. “Under no circumstances would I ever vote for an atheist [for president] because they are terrible [and have] no moral code” (Positive Atheism, 2004). This is said by one of the hosts of *The View*, Star Jones Reynolds. Imagine that later in the show, the hosts of *The View* are interviewing the ever-popular Ben Stein from *Win Ben Stein’s Money* and speech writer for Former President Reagan. Stein is talking about what it was like to be in New York after September 11:

I am back in L.A. now. And I keep thinking back to my time in New York after the bombings . . . I was crying so much I could not see, and the other diners joined in, and I thought, what do you do with such atheistic evil? (Positive Atheism, 2004)

“Turn off the TV!” you yell. You are visibly shaken up, and your partner asks you what is wrong. “Nothing,” you say, “I just don’t really feel like watching TV right now.” Like thousands of college students, you are an atheist. Unfortunately, you are too scared, too afraid, too ashamed, and too confused to talk about it with anyone, even your partner. There is no place on campus where you feel comfortable talking about your beliefs, and even worse, you have yet to find a single person who has relayed a positive message of atheism.

While I never had all of the above scenarios happen to me in one sitting, over my lifetime, I have had a multitude of similar experiences as an atheist. My undergraduate years were spent with confusion and no one to talk to, and my graduate school days were filled with coming to terms with life as an out and proud atheist. It is as an atheist that I write this article to hopefully shed some light on, in my opinion, an invisible population on our campuses.

Definitions

In the United States of America (U.S.A.), there are a number of subjects including politics, religion, and sex (sexual activity and sexuality) we are socialized not to talk about. I find that a big reason we are taught to shy away from these topics is our lack of common definitions for words and terms. Whenever the topic of religion does come up in

conversation, it is important to establish a common ground where all persons involved can move forward with the same definitions of words.

I have furnished my own definitions of words that are commonly defined differently from reader to reader with the hope that a more universal reading can occur. An *atheist* is one who does not assert that there are gods. This broad or weak definition of the word, has been historically prevalent. It encompasses those who are agnostic and those who are anti-theists. An *agnostic* is one who does not believe that they have enough evidence to say that god or gods exist or do not exist. An anti-theist is one who is militantly opposed to the idea of god. Finally, a theist is one who believes “in a personal God or Gods as the creator(s) and ruler(s) of the universe” (Nash, 2001, p. 27).

Atheism Unpacked

Most atheists would tell you that atheism was in existence long before any other form of theism. They believe that the first *Homo sapiens* that walked the earth were atheists for many years before the construction of theism. This makes the history of atheism too vast to cover in this article. However, there is one glaring fact that emerges from the history of atheism, especially in the U.S.A. As described by our first-year college student, the words atheist and atheism carry negative images and sentiments. It is important then to unpack or process some of these in order to dispel negative views.

An atheist is:

- (a) Someone who does not assert that there are gods. This is where the commonalities end.

An atheist is not:

- (a) Someone who becomes atheist so that they can do whatever they want. (In fact, many atheists follow very strict moral codes of conduct.)
 - (b) Someone who hates God. (They cannot hate something that they do not believe in.)
 - (c) Someone who worships Satan. (Similar to their disbelief in gods, atheists do not believe in demons or monsters.)
 - (d) Someone who becomes an atheist because of a fight with a priest, pastor, reverend, etc. (Though it is very possible that this is the path someone takes to becoming an atheist, it is not the only path. The paths to atheism are many.)
 - (e) Someone who believes in the same thing as the entire group of atheists. (Atheism itself is not a worldview, nor is it a philosophy of life. It is an important part of a larger view, but atheism alone is not supposed to be a comprehensive philosophy of life.)
 - (f) Someone who is evil, (Yes, there are atheists who are evil but no more than any other group of peoples.)
- [Parenthetical comments inserted.] (Krueger, 1998, p. 19-23)

Campus Life

As much as colleges and universities are microcosms of a diverse national and global human community, our institutions have a unique opportunity and responsibility to provide a context of learning which values diversity as a necessary component to education. Too often even the most progressive diversity initiatives and multi-cultural efforts leave religion out of the mix. How is it possible to be an educated person in this moment in history and not have an intellectual and a practical understanding of the role that religion plays in shaping the lives of individuals and societies? (Kazanjian & Laurence, 2002, p. 312)

While it is true that talk of religious diversity is often left out of campus diversity initiatives, the topic of atheism is discussed far less frequently. Though we have thousands of atheists coming to our campuses each year, it is nearly impossible to find any literature dealing specifically with atheist college students.

Let us go back to our role playing from the beginning of this article. Again, put yourself in the shoes of an atheist student. This time you are a member of the basketball team. You are not the best player on the team, but you average ten to twenty points a game. Despite all of this, you are going to talk to the coach because you do not think you are going to play next year. You know that she is going to ask you why. What are you going to tell her? You need to focus on your academics? You really want to get involved with student government and do not think you will have the time

for both? You will tell her anything but the truth. The truth is you feel degraded, disrespected, and demoralized by the team. Before and after every game the team prays to God, and everyone is expected to join. At first, you thought it would not be that big of a deal; you would just sit quietly and think about the game on the bench while the team huddled together. However, you were quickly singled out and pressured to join the “team.”

Since the hey-day of McCarthyism, religious extremists have demonized atheism to the point where declaring one’s non-belief is a bit like admitting to eating babies. This is why the vast majority of atheists and agnostics, who may outnumber all other non-Christian Americans put together, are secretive about their non-belief. Those who are public about their convictions often suffer for it. Many atheist students I know hide their beliefs from their parents and keep painful silence about them. Their concerns, I fear, are justified; a significant fraction of my atheist friends have been cast out and ostracized by their own parents and families because of their religious doubt. (Arajuo, 1998)

Who should atheists turn to? When was the last time you heard someone in the media proclaim that they were an atheist? When was the last time you saw a politician who did not claim some form of religion? Young atheists have very few people to look up to, and if they do happen to find someone it most certainly will not come from popular culture. In the U.S.A., however, what they do have are any number of things telling them that they are wrong: “In God We Trust” on all of the money; The Pledge of Allegiance; a president who, while governor of Texas, created Jesus Day; a president who in every speech makes reference to God; a House of Congress who sings *God Bless America* for the world to see; the Boy Scouts of America who maintain that no member can grow into the best kind of citizen without recognizing his obligation to god; daily battles over the separation of church and state; professional and college athletes giving thanks to god for helping them win; billboard signs along the highway referring in some way to god; missionaries going door to door; hearing “god bless you” when someone sneezes; and Christian radio and television stations.

Some of these are more significant than others, but all lead to a population of people who do not feel safe or comfortable telling the world something about themselves. Most talk of being atheist is reserved for private conversations with trusted friends.

The Role of Student Affairs Administrators

It is fair to say that the college years are a time of change for students. If you have chosen a career in student affairs, it is probable that you have had some education on student development theory. It is also likely that, either in your education or your career, you have been exposed to the vast amount of identities our students use to identify themselves. One of the most widely used theories in regard to identity development is that of Chickering and Reisser. In short, their theory proposed seven vectors of development that contribute to the formation of identity (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). While not specifically indicated in Chickering and Reisser’s work, it is clear that religion or the lack of religion can play a role in identity development. Most appropriately, it fits into vector five, establishing identity:

Identity includes comfort with body and appearance, comfort with gender and sexual orientation, a sense of one’s social and cultural heritage, a clear self-concept and comfort with one’s roles and lifestyle, a secure sense of self in light of feedback from significant others, self-acceptance and self-esteem, and personal stability and integration. (Evans, et al., 1998, pp. 39-40)

Religion is appearing on the radar screen of many student affairs professionals and preparation programs are now offering classes that discuss the topic to better educate the future professionals in the field. Why, some ask, should student affairs professionals be concerned with the topic? I believe Nash (2001) put it best in his book *Religious pluralism in the academy: Opening the dialogue*:

These non-professorial educators are frequently there – whether or not they want to be – whenever students experience the gnawing pain, confusion, and tongue-tied inarticulateness that comes from seeking meaning; whenever students yearn for something morally solid in which to root their lives, something that does not disappear into the thin air of hedonism, relativism, or subjectivism; or, once again, in the words of Viktor Frankl, whenever students realize that they might indeed “have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.” (p. 7)

It was during my senior year of college that one of these moments happened for me, and as an atheist I believed I had no one to whom I could turn. This is a journal entry of mine from that time:

March 11, 1998 12:06 a.m. My grandmother died about 3:00 a.m. yesterday. I'm relieved and sad. She was my favorite relative. I can smell her baking by just thinking about it. Like everyone else in my life I wish I would have spent more time with her. She had a capacity to love that will never be touched, everyone loved her. She hasn't had the zest for life since grandpa died. That is why I'm relieved, I may not believe in heaven but I know she did and she is with grandpa now.

I can Live life,
I can enjoy life,
I can let life engulf me.
All this I can do
Without God.
But without God I can't
See her when I'm gone.
Can't touch her when I'm gone.
Can't live when I'm gone.
I am jealous of you
Who is close to God
Who has God.
For you will live forever.
(J. Johnson, personal communication)

During this time I became very depressed. I remember sitting at the funeral and feeling all alone among a church full of relatives. While I do not know if it was true, I felt like I was the only one who did not believe in god. At school it was the same way, my Hall Director (I was a Resident Advisor) was talking to me about his relationship with god, and since I have never felt comfortable sharing my lack of belief with anyone, my loneliness grew and continued until four years later when I found myself in graduate school.

When discussing religious pluralism, whether it is in the classroom, over lunch, or in a cross-campus dialogue, it is easy to be concerned about seeking the voice of all different religions and forgetting about those without a religion. Where do they fit into the conversation? There may be a belief that atheists are not interested in being in on the conversation, but they are! As an atheist, I have just as much at stake, if not more, when I am talking of religious pluralism. I would love to feel comfortable talking freely about what it means to be an atheist. It is part of who I am. Nash (2001) used the line, "whether or not they want to be" (p. 7) to describe the situation student affairs professionals are often put in when students go into crisis on our campuses. Whether it is a death in the family or breaking up with a partner, it is these times when a student is most likely to turn to a religious group for comfort and support. Often, our atheist students have nowhere to turn and they come to us seeking that same comfort and support.

Given the fact that student religious organizations exist on virtually all college and university campuses (Campus Crusade for Christ, Newman Centers, Hillel, Muslim organizations and the like)—and that corresponding freethought, secular humanist, and unbeliever groups generally do not—we think it vitally important that freethought organizations be formed on every campus. Too many secular humanists, atheists, and skeptics face the demands of college life alone. A campus freethought organization can provide much-needed support, and when necessary, help to defend unbelievers' rights. (Campus Freethought Alliance, 1996)

We must check ourselves during these situations on our own views towards atheism. We cannot automatically refer them to another office on campus that is better trained to deal with atheists. More than likely, that office does not exist. They may have been disowned by their parents for going against the beliefs of the family. It is very possible you may be the only one they can find to listen. This scenario may never happen to you, but at least be aware that it is possible the next time you are talking with a student. Do not assume that they have a religion. Check the messages you are sending out by your words and your surroundings. Do you work in an atheist-friendly zone? Is there anything in your office that might make someone shy away from talking to you? Do you have your atheist ally sticker up on your door? Do you even believe that you could put one on your door with a clear conscience? Is there an atheist group on campus? If not, why? What can you do to get one there? These questions are things to think about while you are sitting around in your office. Add one more item to your to-do list: atheist ally development.

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