

Atheism... Plus What?

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“Atheism+” or “Atheism Plus” was first promoted by atheist activist Jennifer McCreight, at the suggestion of one of her readers, to describe a movement that had been growing within New Atheism for several years. It is a movement for promoting moral values and the discussion of societal problems among atheists, and for making the atheist community more welcoming of, and responsive to, women and minorities.

Atheism is no longer just the belief-state of various diverse individuals. Atheism is now a social identity movement and a growing and active community. This is most especially the case in America and Canada, but there are similar movements growing in other countries, from the Philippines to Ghana and (secretly) even Iran and Pakistan. Australia and the UK have seen smaller but similar movement growth and recognition. And beyond. Here my focus will be on American atheism, which by its volume and output fuels and encourages much of the rest, but as other societies become more free and secular, or wake up more to the dangerous influence of religion even in their already free and secular societies, I think more nations will follow.

The worldwide recognition now tendered to the term “New Atheism” illustrates the phenomenon I’m referring to. What distinguishes the “new” from old atheism is precisely this feature: atheists are increasingly, and loudly, out and proud. More and more of us no longer hide, and as a group we no longer leave the defense of our beliefs or the critique of religion to a rare handful of intellectuals, but actively engage these defenses and critiques far more widely and openly, online and in print, personally and collectively. New Atheism is characterized by an explosion of public authors and speakers declaring their atheism and writing about it, by the rapid and unprecedented growth of public online communities and national and local organizations dedicated specifically to nonbelievers, and a corresponding proliferation of national, state, and local conferences, fairs, clubs, and meetups for atheists, including a huge increase in groups representing atheist students on college campuses (and more recently even in American high schools).

Though all of this organized or active growth includes nonbelievers who adopt other labels than “atheist,” the label “atheist” is the most rapidly growing and most widely recognized identity label, and all nonbelievers, regardless of label, are atheists in the basic clinical sense of having no belief in a god, and most do participate side-by-side with self-

identifying atheists in the same events and organizations and online venues. But more importantly, it is “atheist” that has become the identity-descriptor most widely recognized outside the nonbelieving community. Atheists are recognized as a constituency by the media – the same media that often does not understand what words like “agnostic” or “humanist” even mean (and rarely knows they have had their own communities and organizations). But labels aside, nonbelievers now even have their own lobbyists in Washington D.C. Such is the growth of their status as an actual community, that they can cobble together enough funding from atheists nationwide to actually pay a full time lobbyist, normally an extravagant luxury for any interest group.

So, atheism is now a movement and is very much an actual community. And as such, its members have expressed and pursued the most widely shared goals of making more and better atheists, and then giving them resources and a comfortable social environment (where they can be themselves and recover their sanity among fellow atheists and not feel isolated and alone). But once a community exists, as a community, it has responsibilities. Any organized and active community has a voice. People will hear that voice and listen and associate what is said as coming from and representing that community to one degree or another. So will that community use its voice responsibly? Communities also by nature have resources. Time, money, personnel, votes, communication networks, information networks, action networks, its own media. Will they use those resources responsibly? Any community, simply by virtue of the fact of being visible as a community, will also be judged. Will that community ensure that it is judged accurately? Will that community care how it is perceived at all? Communities can also influence their members, through all of the above. Will they influence their members for the better?

These questions can no longer be avoided. It can no longer be said that atheists can just be atheists and mind their own business. That cat is already out of the bag. Atheists have built actual physical and widely-networked communities and are continuing to actively grow them and participate in them. We are no longer isolated individuals. We are now a community (no matter how diverse and decentralized) with a voice and an identity, and with resources, visibility, and influence, all recognized by the wider public. And this makes a difference. Even our most basic goal of increasing the number of atheists – or even just the number of organized and contributing atheists (to increase our resources and influence) – cannot wisely be divorced from the question of whether, as we increase the number of atheists, they will be morally responsible atheists. It is all the more important that the atheists we seek to populate our movement and our organizations and social groups be morally responsible atheists, but it is also quite important enough that we not increase the number of atheists in society as a whole who are not morally responsible atheists. The effect on society would otherwise be a very visible and real harm, and would entail that we are actively posing a danger to society rather than a benefit. That is neither what we should want to do, nor how we should want to be perceived by the general population.

As a community we have also widely adopted the additional goals of protecting the rights of atheists. This has been most visible in respect to the fight to perfect or maintain

separation of church and state, so that atheists can receive the equal protection of the laws and be recognized and treated by our governments as full and equal citizens. But this same effort obviously must also include working to help atheists fight not just state but private discrimination and harassment. The atheist community's response to the discrimination and harassment of Jessica Ahlquist very publicly exemplified this. That should not just be some isolated phenomenon. Rather, it is precisely the sort of thing the atheist community as a whole should be doing as widely and as often as it can. Atheists standing up for other atheists. This is why many atheists have recently been actively campaigning for similar responses from the community and its leaders to help fight the persistent online harassment of prominent atheist women, harassment often perpetrated by other atheists (not that it should even matter who is doing the harassing). Anyone who cannot see the similarity between the two cases needs to take a remedial critical thinking course. (Although for those who might not know what I'm talking about, you can peruse my articles on the subject at freethoughtblogs.com/carrier/archives/category/atheism-plus.)

And again, as a community, we not only have, but have widely embraced and pursued, the goal of serving the social and informational needs of atheists, building organizations and meetups and clubs and online networks specifically for the purpose. We, as atheists, seek out atheist sources of educational information about the world, and we seek out atheist social clubs for socializing and enjoyment. It is the atheist community that facilitates that and makes that possible. Indeed such a thing only barely existed before. It's rapidly growing now.

Atheism is therefore no longer just the lack of belief in a god. Atheism is now an influential social movement and a growing, physically interactive community, with goals and responsibilities that have already grown well beyond merely lacking or dispelling god-belief. Though an atheist as such is still and always will be just someone who doesn't believe in a god, what we are seeing now is a community of atheists who are atheists plus certain other things. And in fact we can only thrive and be successful as a community – and we can thereby, through the directed power, influence, and resources of that community, far more effectively increase the number of atheists, and especially the number of morally responsible atheists – if we accept the fact that we all need to be more than just atheists. We all need to be atheists plus certain other things. And we should want as many other atheists as possible to join us in that.

Plus what, then? Atheists, like almost any group, are amazingly diverse, and pursue a wide plethora of interests and passions, and there is no reason to expect all to be alike in these respects. Indeed, division of labor and interest is crucial to the success of any community, so all being alike would be a considerable detriment to our community's success and effectiveness. But there has to be a minimum set of core values we must all share if our community is to thrive and succeed, and be a community of consistent benefit to its own members, and be a community that will earn the respect of the larger world community of which it is a part. So I have cobbled this minimum down to a simple formula: atheism + humanism + skepticism. We need to merge the main goals and values of the growing atheist identity movement with the relatively stagnant humanist and skepticism movements, the latter two also being very real communities, only for whatever reason less successful in growing numbers and media recognition (there have been no

exploding “New Humanism” or “New Skepticism” movements, for example). As a self-identifying atheist (or agnostic or nonbeliever or whatever label you prefer) you need not declare yourself a humanist or a skeptic or join their respective organizations, but you do need to embrace their essential core values.

This should be a no-brainer. The core humanist values of compassion, honesty, and reasonableness, of a concern for the welfare of the human race and the application of reason rather than faith to better it, are essential. No community, no society, can thrive that does not embrace those values and denounce those who renounce them. Likewise, the core values of reasonable skepticism and critical thought, and the testing of views and claims against the canons of evidence and reason before accepting them in any degree, could hardly be values any atheist should want to abandon, much less deride. And it’s hard to imagine how the atheist community can be any good for itself much less the world if it abandons the one thing that potentially makes atheists a greater asset to the world than religionists: an uncompromising, uncompartimentalized commitment to reasoned doubt and skeptical analysis. Thus, atheism, as a movement and a community, needs to be more than just atheism. It needs to be atheism plus these core values of humanism and skepticism.

In practical terms, this means we need to be consistent in holding ourselves to these values, and denouncing (by more persistent and visible exercises of free speech, down-voting, disavowing, and other nonviolent means) those who reject or unrepentantly fail to abide by these core values, whether they be religious or not. Being an atheist should not get you a pass on the same criticism and denunciation we would deliver to a theist who said or did the same things. A community cannot be said to be governed by a value it does not stand up for. And standing up for a value means more than just calling out those who abandon it, or apologizing and correcting ourselves when we fail to uphold it ourselves. It also means living those values. And this means encouraging atheists to adopt a greater humanitarian concern for what’s going on in their movement and in the world. It means asking people to be compassionate, honest, and reasonable (as much as is itself reasonable). It means being compassionate, honest, and reasonable (as much as is itself reasonable). It likewise means embracing critical reasoning and courteous and constructive criticism and being responsive to it yourself. It means directing the same skeptical and empirical and logical standards you apply to religion to everything else as well, every social and political belief you hold. It means being a good skeptic. Not a bad one. It also means being a good person. Not a bad one.

The term for this idea, “Atheism+” or “Atheism Plus,” was first promoted by atheist activist Jennifer McCreight, at the suggestion of one of her readers, to describe a movement that had been growing within New Atheism for several years before it had a name, a movement for promoting moral values and the discussion of societal problems among atheists, and for making the atheist community more welcoming of, and responsive to, women and minorities. McCreight listed some examples of what this meant to her, saying that she wanted to be part of a movement of atheists who were not just atheists but atheists plus people who care about social justice, who support women’s rights (and gender equity generally), who protest racism (and seek to combat it even among and

within themselves), who fight homophobia and transphobia, and who use critical thinking and skepticism to do all of this as well as everything else they choose to do.

Notably, this movement already existed within the New Atheism movement for years before it had any name. It thus had many advocates who did not describe themselves with the label Atheism+ because that label didn't even exist. But now that it does, it is still not necessary for anyone to adopt that label, any more than it was necessary before. It is merely a clinical term that just happens to describe someone who adopts the basic platform of being an atheist + a humanist + a skeptic. In that fashion it is like *Homo sapiens sapiens*. Every human is a *Homo sapiens sapiens* even if they never call themselves that or never use that label for themselves, but prefer instead other words like "human," "person," "man," "woman," or what have you. Thus, not everyone furthering the same values and goals as Atheism+ adopts that specific label, nor need they. What matters is simply the formula: that we be more than atheists, that we be good humanists and skeptics as well.

Christians often claim that atheists have no morals, and that more atheists in a society means a less moral society – indeed, they even imagine it would be a more dangerous and awful society. If you disagree with those claims and assumptions, if you take offense at them, then you surely have to stand up for and act on your values, the values they are denying you live by and fight for. And at the very least, those values must surely be compassion, honesty, reasonableness, and informed and rational skepticism. What this also means is that you shouldn't let bad atheists represent you, nor let them (or anyone else) think they do by your silence.

We should likewise be using our collective intra-community resources to make the atheist community as a whole better informed and more active on social issues, and not just the limited and isolated domains of "science, philosophy, and religion." We should likewise accept and encourage constructive criticism of each other within the movement and use it to better ourselves and our community and its institutions (which does require heeding and calling out the difference between harassment or verbal abuse and actual constructive criticism). In both respects we can demonstrate to the wider world community that the atheist community and movement is not tone deaf to major issues in the world, that we have ideas to contribute toward those subjects that can be compared with the competing ideas of religious faith communities. We can also be making our own atheist community better informed about the problems of the world. And by doing so we can make the atheist community better informed than any other faith community, thereby becoming a more reliable community to consult on those issues.

It's also important to serve the sanity and happiness of atheists by promoting more social activities where atheists can enjoy the company of fellow atheists in shared pursuits. Many atheist community groups have already taken up the idea of Special Interest Groups or SIGs as a way to serve this need. The basic idea is that there are general meetings and socials for the whole atheist community group, but also as many separate SIGs as are desired, which serve the interests of select groups of atheists without having to involve all members of the wider group, as others may prefer other interests instead. For example, bowling clubs, knitting clubs, book clubs, movie clubs, music clubs, nature clubs, science clubs, parenting clubs, drinking clubs, painting clubs, political clubs, charity clubs, clubs

specifically devoted to hitting-the-streets style gay rights or animal welfare activism, and so on. Such a model could and should be expanded to all atheist community and campus groups, and embraced by national organizations that have regularly-meeting chapters. Ultimately, atheists need to have a community to enjoy and get involved in and have fun with. And that does not require replicating the church model. Secular social and hobby clubs have existed for centuries. And one can innovate all manner of new ways to network and socialize within any interest or identity group, like atheism has become.

Nevertheless, institutions can pursue their own narrower goals while still embracing Atheism+ as a laudable set of goals within the wider atheist community they serve. No one is suggesting every atheist organization gear up to fight social justice issues, for example, or deploy a SIG model. You can stick to your mission statement as always, whatever it is. But if your organization has, for example, a mission goal of increasing the number of atheists (or even just of organized atheists), you will have to be responsive to the social realities of what will actually accomplish that. A focus on public education's role in expanding and improving science, reasoning and skepticism, for example, is one of the most important ways to grow atheism, as it is precisely such education that statistically shows a strong correlation with increasing atheism. Broadening appeal to women and minorities will also become an increasing necessity as the white male base not only shrinks but becomes increasingly tapped out. And to draw more women and minorities, you should look for capable women and minority experts and leaders and give them leadership roles, and you should be responsive to their concerns (which will often differ from those of the average white male), and you need to treat them well when they show up (which does not mean "special," but just like everyone else).

The role of differing concerns is more significant than is often recognized. Black atheists are most especially concerned about such issues as inner city poverty and prison reform, areas where religiously-driven values or initiatives (or even religiously-motivated apathy) are the main barrier to making anything better. Theistic retributivism and latent racism often stand in the way of prison reform, for example, an issue any compassionate humanist should be passionately concerned about – as well should even a Machiavellian pragmatist, since most prisoners get out eventually, and you therefore have to live with them; it would obviously be more rational to ensure that prisoners are better people when they get out than when they went in. And that's not the only issue to address with prison reform, as prisons have increasingly become dens of inhumane misery (with high frequencies of rape, intimidation, abuse, violence and racketeering), and now house alarming numbers of relatively innocent victims – as anyone who recognizes the social injustice of the drug war or anti-prostitution laws should acknowledge, but even just the racial disparities in the conviction of the innocent and in the sentencing even of the guilty should be a humanist issue. Black atheists face religious opposition in this domain, a domain that disproportionately affects them, and they rightly see this as an atheist issue. So should the rest of us. Indeed, arguably, religiously-motivated injustices in the prison system is a far more serious threat to the welfare of our nation and our species than teaching creationism in the classroom. Which is not to slight the danger posed by the

latter, but there is something not right about an atheist community caring more about creationism in high schools than Christian hubris and retributivism in prisons.

The same sort of thing should be obvious in education reform. If education is a major factor in making more atheists, and making more atheists is your goal, then shouldn't the disparity in education between white and black neighborhoods be of significant concern to the atheist community? In these respects and others, it's important for atheist groups and organizations who want to grow their numbers and racially integrate their community, as well as increase the number of participating women at least to a level of parity, that they actually ask women and minorities (a lot of them, not just a few) what would get them to attend your events, become members of your organization, and financially support it. Then take their answers seriously. You might not have the means or mission to take direct action on every matter, but there is always something you can do to facilitate the special interests of the groups you want to recruit from.

Social and political activism at the institutional level is unnecessary. There are often plenty of secular-enough organizations for that, although atheists can still create their own, and many do, whether stand-alone or SIGs. But all atheist-serving organizations can at least do a minimal number of things. If you are running such an organization, you can:

- Help encourage your members to get more informed and involved in humanitarian and social justice issues generally (in other words, you can promote morally responsible atheism as a general ideal).
- Facilitate members' access to reliable information and discussion about such issues. For example, by researching and providing the best resources, or direction to discussion venues, specializing in any given matter, or providing your own specialized discussion and networking venues for that purpose, whether moderated online forums or local SIGs (such as through providing to members well-researched start-up instruction manuals for successfully launching and running various kinds of SIG, and providing any other networking and informational resources you can reasonably generate to help with that).
- Sponsor talks from atheist experts in these kinds of issues at atheist conferences and meetups, thereby having an atheist perspective represented on these matters, and communicated to the atheist community. Try also to seek out experts who are atheist women and minorities (and don't just have them talk about their being a woman or a minority; let them speak about the issues they want to or have expertise in), and offer tabling or coordinate events from time to time with minority atheist groups (American blacks [e.g. Black Nonbelievers, Inc. and Black Atheists of Atlanta] and Hispanics [e.g. Hispanic American Freethinkers and Hispanic Atheists Society of America] have already begun developing these, but there are other groups that might like to have a voice, from atheist Filipinos to ex-Muslims; and there is now also Secular Woman [www.secularwoman.org], the first national atheist organization for women).

- Occasionally co-sponsor charitable and educational actions in some of these issues (and be visible doing so). This is what corporations do, purely to grow visibility and market share (the exact same thing atheist organizations are aiming at, only the product they are selling is atheism – preferably morally responsible atheism). Such actions need not be extensive, but should be considered a part of your marketing or PR budgets, as they will generate free advertising from media coverage and grass-roots community awareness. They will also communicate atheist moral values to the wider community, thus representing a different image of atheism than is commonly disseminated.

Other ways to help include providing free or subsidized day care at conferences and events, or even creating a babysitting SIG within your community or campus group where child care duties are rotated among volunteers so parents can attend more atheist meetups or socials. Think also of the disabled. How might you be better serving the deaf or the blind, or even just wheelchair access? These are all examples of what Atheism+ is about.

Even apart from the specific concerns of actual organizations and their active members, atheism still also exists as a widely distributed and highly networked and interacting community. So the question remains. Are we as a community going to actually care about stuff...like sexism, poverty, crime, racism, corruption, injustice, or political and media deception? Or only care when it has to do with religion? Stop to think for a moment how bizarre it would be if atheists only care about things when religion is involved. If you don't think that's weird, you haven't thought about it enough. And yet, indeed, often all these problems do have a lot to do with religion, as I noted in the case of barriers to prison reform. Pick almost any social justice issue troubling our country like that, and standing in the way of solving the problem, often indeed causing the problem, is some religious belief or attitude, or some assumption whose roots lie in religious thinking. Or there is some pseudoscientific or false belief involved, which humanist skepticism would be well-equipped to dispel. Or both.

But even apart from the fact that we should care about our fellow atheists (including the cares and concerns of atheist women and minorities, every bit as much as those of any other atheists) and about our fellow human beings (who suffer from many things worse than religion), and about what values we represent to the world community (and thus whether we speak up as atheists about what we perceive to be the problems of the world and how to solve them), even apart from all that, just to grow our numbers and thus our resources and influence, we need to think outside the box. We need to appeal to a wider demographic than those who just want to talk about God all the time. Far more people, of all demographics in my experience, want to talk about how atheists, as atheists, would solve social problems or make a difference in the world. Or who want atheists, as atheists, to question other things, like claims being made in the political or moral domain, and not just talk about creationism or theology all the time. Those things are fine. I write and give speeches on all those things myself. But I also write and give speeches on many other subjects, and want dearly to hear and read a greater range of topics at atheist events and

venues in turn. I know many less involved atheists who do as well, who would actually attend events and get more involved if they saw that happening.

Certainly almost all atheists really push the ideas of logical rationality, of evidence-based reasoning, of fallacy-detection, of questioning, of applying science to the way we understand the world and philosophy and morality. These ideas often lie at the core of our identity and are ever-present in our discourse. Which means the atheist community can most readily accomplish what other communities can't, which is better informing ourselves. And we can do this on a broad range of issues and thereby produce better-informed conclusions about how to solve the world's problems, conclusions without religious or faith-based premises, conclusions reached from such a well-developed commitment to rationality and skepticism that rivals nearly any other community one can name. We can thus use our atheism, which already gives us this drive for evidence-based reasoning, this drive for knowledge, this drive for a better understanding of reason and logic, to become more informed as political citizens of our respective countries. And not just to make our community better informed politically, but also in terms of our moral values. We can have a more open and honest conversation about what our moral values should be and why, and to what extent we can realise those values in our behavior moving forward. Atheists need this, especially as a community, as a movement. It is necessary for atheists to wake up, if they haven't already, and become more than just atheists. It's time for us to declare ourselves for atheism plus humanism and skepticism.