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## Atheists Attempt Public Relations

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The Irish poet Brendan Behan once quipped, “There is no such thing as bad publicity except your obituary.” Some atheists evidently disagree, and they want to help atheism get over a rather significant public relations problem.

As Tom Krattenmaker reports in *USA Today*, “Being an atheist is not easy in this age of great public religiosity in America. Not when the overwhelming majority of Americans profess some form of belief in God. Not when many believers equate non-belief with immorality.”

Furthermore, many atheists recognize that well known atheist celebrities such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have shown an abrasive and belligerent face of atheism to the public. Add to that Bill Maher’s film “Religulous” and the lingering memory of militant atheists of the last century such as Madalyn Murray O’Hair. They do have a problem.



Some also have a strategy, as Krattenmaker explains:

*But if Margaret Downey keeps making progress with her campaign to show a different face of atheism, it's possible to imagine the day when avowing one's non-belief will not be political suicide. (It seems to be just that today, given that only one member of Congress, Rep. Pete Stark of California, has revealed that he does not believe in a deity; in view of polling data suggesting that some 5% to 15% of Americans are atheists and agnostics, it seems certain there are at least a few more non-believing senators and representatives in the halls — and closets — of Congress.)*

*Downey, having recently finished a stint as president of the Atheist Alliance International, is now organizing a non-believers' unity convention to take place in 2011. She is the poster person for positive atheism, a term she uses for a new face of atheism that emphasizes the good things in which non-believers do believe.*

In other words, Downey wants atheists to be known more for what they do believe rather than for what they deny. It's going to be a tough sell. Krattenmaker nevertheless reports that there is a spirit of “positive atheism” among many atheist groups now.

In his words:

*The spirit of positive atheism infused this fall's convention of the Atheist Alliance, which comprises nearly 60 U.S. atheist groups with combined membership of about 5,000. Attendees gave blood and had their hair shorn for use in cancer patients' wigs. At last year's convention, Downey presided over a baby-naming ceremony, where parents and their supporters exalted wisdom, love, honesty and the beauty of nature, and the newborns were given not godparents, but “guideparents.”*

All this makes for interesting reading and media attention, but it's hard to see that the average American will see this new approach as reassuring. The fact remains that atheism, by definition, is a worldview based on the denial of God's existence. Atheists may attempt to create rituals, ceremonies, and practices that mimic Christian traditions, but this serves

only to point to the infinite emptiness at the heart of the atheist worldview.

I think I can understand why atheists are concerned about public relations. A kinder, gentler atheism might sell better in the public square. But it remains what it is — a worldview that denies the existence of a divine Creator, Redeemer, or Judge.

As Tom Krattenmaker acknowledges, one key sticking point is the fact that a recent poll indicated that most Americans believe that an atheist should not serve as President of the United States.

Now, there is no legal or constitutional barrier to an atheist serving as President. The problem for an atheist candidate is the reluctance of the electorate. It seems that a majority of Americans believes that belief in God — a divine Creator, Redeemer, and Judge — is an important qualification for leadership. No public relations strategy is going to overcome that.

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