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Outing Atheists — Richard Dawkins Launches New Campaign

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Oxford University professor Richard Dawkins, probably the best-known atheist of our times, is launching a campaign to call atheists “out of the closet,” so to speak. Even as his book, *The God Delusion*, continues as a best-seller, he wants to mobilize the unbelieving community for greater influence and action.

His call comes in the form of an essay published at his own Web site, richarddawkins.net. In [the essay](#), Dawkins writes: “Our choir is large, but much of it remains in the closet. Our repertoire may include the best tunes, but too many of us are mouthing the words *sotto voce* with head bowed and eyes lowered. It follows that a major part of our consciousness-raising effort should be aimed, not at converting the religious but at encouraging the non-religious to admit it – to themselves, to their families, and to the world. This is the purpose of the OUT campaign.”

Dawkins makes clear that he does not intend to follow the example of the homosexual community and “out” persons against their wills. He is satisfied to invite and encourage unbelievers to be willing to declare this in public:

Before I go any further, I must forestall one major risk of misunderstanding. The obvious comparison with the gay community is vulnerable to going too far: to ‘outing’ as a transitive verb whose object might be an unfortunate individual not yet – or not ever – ready to confide in the world. Our OUT campaign will have nothing, repeat nothing to do with outing in that active sense. If a closet atheist wants to come out, that is her decision to make, and nobody else’s. What we can do is provide support and encouragement to those who willingly decide to out themselves. This may seem trivial to people in parts of Europe, or in regions of the United States dominated by urban intellectuals where support and encouragement is unnecessary. It is anything but trivial to people in other areas of the United States, and even more so in parts of the Islamic world where apostasy is, by Koranic authority, punishable by death.

Dawkins wants the presence of unbelievers to be known. He suggests that atheists out themselves on bumper stickers and t-shirts — anything to advertise their presence.

As he writes:

The OUT campaign has potentially as many sides to it as you can think of words to precede “out”. “Come OUT” has pride of place and is the one I have so far dealt with. Related to it is “Reach OUT” in friendship and solidarity towards those who have come out, or who are contemplating that step which, depending on their family or home town prejudices, may require courage. Join, or found local support groups and on-line forums. Speak OUT, to show waverers they are not alone. Organize conferences or campus events. Attend rallies and marches. Write letters to the local newspaper. Lobby politicians, at local and national level. The more people come out and are known to have done so, the easier will it be for others to follow.

Professor Dawkins may be right — his “choir” may be larger than many people recognize or are willing to admit. The intellectual elites are increasingly secular in worldview and the elite academic world Dawkins inhabits certainly has its

share of atheists. But are they ready to “out” themselves?

Truth is not determined by numbers, but influence often is. This is what concerns Richard Dawkins, and this is why he wants atheists to come out of the closet. We will soon know if his campaign is successful.

In any event, Professor Dawkins also has other issues in his sights. *The Times* [London] reports that Dawkins is launching a new television series in Britain devoted to exposing false beliefs concerning religion and the paranormal. According to Dawkins’ restricted worldview, there is little difference there.

In any event, the paper’s article on the series notes that Dawkins is not only a scientist — he is also a believer in *scientism*. In effect, science is his religion:

For Dawkins, of course, science is a religion, at least in the sense that it is something he fiercely believes in, a belief system that insists its dogma stand up to rigorous “double blind” experimental testing and rejects anything that fails. Those who refuse to put their beliefs to any test, he suggests, do so because they instinctively know they will fail.

More:

As far as Dawkins is concerned the truth is indeed out there, but too many of us are looking in the wrong direction. I put it to him that his assertion that these unverifiable beliefs “undermine our civilisation” flies in the face of the importance of richness of myth and religious belief to our artistic and cultural inheritance. His answer is straightforward: “I suppose that’s an aesthetic judgment.”

Those who base their defense of belief in God upon a argument based in “our artistic and cultural inheritance” set themselves up for a fall. On the other hand, Richard Dawkins’ worldview of scientism quickly runs up against questions it cannot even begin to answer.

We’ll keep an eye on the OUT campaign.

