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Mr. Taylor
AP English Literature

“A Non-Prophet Organization:”¹

An Exploration of the God Gene Theory and Atheism in America

After September 11, 2001, America saw an overwhelming backlash against the Muslim population in America; thirteen years later, this country still struggles with anti-Muslim sentiment, showcased by the resistance to the proposal for the building of a mosque near the World Trade Center towers' former home. Despite this seemingly staggering prejudice, another group tops the list of America's most publicly and privately disliked and mistrusted. No, not Muslims, but atheists.² While the majority of Americans specifically dislike atheists, atheists themselves make up only a minuscule minority of America, representing 5% of the population.³ This statistic continues to stand out when compared to the atheism percentages of America's first world counterparts; countries like China, Japan, and France comfortably count atheists as a third or more of their population,⁴ while America resides in a bracket with mainly other third world countries.⁵ Even at face value, America's small atheistic population stands out as an anomaly, but

¹ "George Carlin." *Goodreads*. Goodreads, n.d. Web. 17 Feb. 2014. <<http://goodreads.com>>.

² Wade, Lisa. "Distrust for Atheists and the New Relevance of Faith." *The Society Pages*.

³ *Global Index of Religion and Atheism*. N.p.: WIN-Gallup International, 2012. Print. (See Appendix A)

⁴ *Global Index of Religion and Atheism*.

⁵ See Appendix A

the incongruity is even more unusual due to the evidence that a belief in a higher power is hereditary.

Dean Hamer, a molecular biologist employed at the National Cancer Institute, first presented the idea that genetics help control an individual's inclination to believe in a higher power through *The God Gene: How Faith is Hardwired into our Genes*, a book that includes significant research to back his findings. This theory rests on the idea that prehistoric environments selected for humans who believed in a higher power, meaning that this trait⁶ must have been reproductively advantageous.⁷ However, as the environment has drastically changed since ancient times, a belief in a higher power no longer gives a reproductive edge to the individual; this environmental transformation means the trait should become less overwhelmingly present in the twenty-first century, as Darwin explained with his theory of evolution and natural selection.⁸ Based on Darwin's ideas, America's tiny atheism rate displays a deeper oddity, partially explained by the aforementioned dislike of atheists that America's specific cultural norms and social expectations shape. Therefore, although in America the environmental conditions that make spirituality beneficial in perpetuating the human race no longer exist, new social cues discourage atheism.

⁶ *trait: n*, an inherited characteristic (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*. N.p.: Merriam-Webster, 2014. Print.)

⁷ "Inherited Traits." *UXL Complete Life Science Resource*. Ed. Julie Carnegie and Leonard C. Bruno. Detroit: UXL, 2009. N. pag. Print.

⁸ "Inherited Traits."

Hamer began his research for a God gene with a simple observation: that a belief in a higher power is universal.⁹ As a scientist, Hamer turned to evolution to justify this omnipresent behavior; according to Robin Henig, writer for the *The New York Times* and recipient of the Alicia Patterson Journalism Fellowship, Hamer was “[looking] for a genetic explanation [and wondering] how...genes might [have] enhanced survival or reproductive success.”¹⁰ As Hamer knew, traits are chosen by the species’ environment. The habitat selects for the trait which “happens to give its owner an edge over another,”¹¹ helping the individual access food or shelter, as stated by the extensive encyclopedia assembled by Leonard Bruno, the Science Manuscript Historian. Ultimately, however, this trait must help the individual reproduce so that its genes can be passed down to future generations. Therefore, as Bruno’s compilation succinctly defines, the “environment is the key to natural selection.”¹²

Once he settled on exploring an evolutionary explanation, Hamer had to prove what aspects of all ancient environments made a belief in a higher power more reproductively successful. First, the unpredictable nature of prehistoric habitats provided an environment where a belief in a higher power would be advantageous; Henig argues that the trait “[helped] humans deal with the grim certainty of death, [offering] solace to the bereaved and comfort to the frightened”¹³ as their

⁹ Archeology has proven that a belief in a higher power existed in all early societies like Mesopotamia, Sumer and Assyria and, as these peoples began to form civilizations, a belief in a higher power was then expressed through religion.

Demarest, Arthur Andrew. "Archeology and Religion." *Encyclopedia of Religion*. Ed. Lindsay Jones. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Virtual Reference Library, 2005. 451-57. Print.

¹⁰ Henig, Robin Marantz. "Darwin's God." *New York Times* 4 Mar. 2007: n. pag. Print.

¹¹ "Natural Selection." *UXL Complete Life Science Resource*. N.p.: n.p., 2009. N. pag. Print.

¹² "Natural Selection."

¹³ Henig

surroundings often provided life-threatening situations. Similarly, the complex nature of the human brain caused a belief in a higher power to be successful; Jeffrey Kluger, a senior editor for *TIME Magazine*, argues that as a species “capable of contemplating its own death, [a need arose for] something larger than ourselves to make that knowledge tolerable.”¹⁴ An individual who believes in an entity greater than him or herself may spend less time obsessing over the threat of imminent death, giving him or her more time to build shelter, gather food, or find a mate. In addition, a belief in a higher power can create the feeling that someone or something is watching one’s every movement, and, as argued by Matthew Hutson, News Editor for *Psychology Today*, and as shown by modern studies, “even...a photo of eyes”¹⁵ causes humans to behave better. Assuming a higher power is observing, a person may act under a higher moral code, causing his or her reputation to improve, and, as Henig asserts, “[giving him or her] an advantage in... finding a mate.”¹⁶ In addition, religion, the product of a communal belief in a higher power, also proved immensely advantageous, as Henig maintains that “no society...ever survived more than three generations without a religious foundation.”¹⁷ Religion can unite a group,¹⁸ helping them prepare for war and gather food more easily, unified by a belief in a god instead of a need for survival.

¹⁴ Kluger, Jeffrey. "Is God in Our Genes?" *TIME Magazine*: n. pag. Print.

¹⁵ Hutson, Matthew. "Kiss Me, I'm an Atheist." *Al Jazeera America*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

¹⁶ Henig

¹⁷ Henig

¹⁸ Henig

After proving that an ancient environment would have made a belief in a higher power more reproductively advantageous, Hamer sought genetic evidence. According to Hamer's book, as manager of the Gene Structure and Regulation Unit at the National Cancer Institute, Hamer used 240 questions to "come as close as science can to measuring what it feels like to be spiritual,"¹⁹ looking at over 2,000²⁰ samples of DNA to pinpoint VMAT2 as a gene linked to spirituality,²¹ or an inclination to believe in a higher god; Hamer found that "the relationship between VMAT2 and self-transcendence was the same in every age bracket,"²² helping to cement his findings. From this research, Hamer inferred that "a single change in a single base in the middle of the gene seemed directly related to the ability to feel self-transcendence."²³

Other studies have reinforced Hamer's claim that humans' inclination for spirituality lies in genetics, like the Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart, conducted since 1979. In this study, over 100 sets of monozygotic²⁴ twins and triplets were evaluated physically and psychologically; some siblings had grown up together in the same environment, while others had been separated

¹⁹ Kluger

²⁰ While Hamer's pool was small compared to the Earth's population, his genetic trends are still representative of the human population.

²¹ VMAT2 is a monoamine transporter, meaning the gene helps transport brain chemicals like serotonin and dopamine; with increased amounts of these chemicals, humans are more likely to feel optimistic or even have spiritual experiences.

Hamer, Dean. *The God Gene: How Faith Is Hardwired into Our Genes*. New York City: Anchor, 2004. Print. "It wouldn't make sense that a single gene was responsible for such a complex trait...there might be another 50 genes or more of similar strength." Hamer

²² Hamer

²³ Kluger

²⁴ *monozygotic: adj*, derived from a single egg (*Merriam-Webster Dictionary*)

at a young age.²⁵ Interestingly, this study found that “the effect of being reared in the same house [was] negligible for many psychological traits,”²⁶ meaning that genetics control many behavioral aspects. These twins and triplets had spent, on average, 5.1 months together before being separated for thirty years, but even with this separation, 80% of the monozygotic siblings shared similar views on personal spirituality.²⁷ In fact, the identical siblings were “twice as likely as fraternal twins to believe as much—or as little—about spirituality as their sibling did,”²⁸ regardless of where they grew up. Significantly, this study showed that nature plays a larger role than nurture in the inclination to believe in a higher power.

While Hamer, backed by similar studies, convincingly argues his point, religious leaders often undermine his theory; Reverend John Polkinghorne of the Royal Society asserts that Hamer “can’t cut faith down to the lowest common denominator of genetic survival.”²⁹ To Polkinghorne and other theologians, the notion that a gene triggers a belief in a god ignores their conviction that self-transcendence is a conscious decision as opposed to an inclination built into humans. However, geneticist by profession and Christian by practice, Justin Barrett, eloquently argues that if, as according to Christian beliefs, “people were crafted to be in a loving relationship with Him... Why wouldn’t God... design [humans] in such a way as to find belief in

²⁵ Bouchard, Thomas J., et al. "Sources of Human Psychological Differences: The Minnesota Study of Twins Reared Apart." *Science* 250 (1990): 223-28. Print.

²⁶ Bouchard

²⁷ Bouchard (See Appendix D)

²⁸ Kluger

²⁹ Kluger

divinity quite natural?"³⁰ While Hamer's theory may not sit comfortably with some religious leaders, the basic tenet of his argument does not contend the existence of a god or higher power, merely the human race's capacity to believe in one. Furthermore, while he dubbed his findings the God Gene Theory, Hamer scrupulously clarifies that his work demonstrates an inclination to believe in a higher power, not to believe in God;³¹ understandably, however, the God Gene Theory is a much more provocative and eye-catching label than an Inclination-to-Believe Theory, perhaps explaining for the inflammatory misnomer.

However, Hamer's argument rests upon the theory of natural selection, defined by the environment's selection of the traits that will be passed on to future generations. But what happens if the environment changes? According to Darwin, those traits that were no longer advantageous in the context of the environment "would eventually disappear."³² Steven Pinker, cognitive scientist and professor at Harvard University, argues that the environment where the human race "spent most of its evolutionary history [was] mainly the foraging or hunter-gatherer lifestyle;"³³ in this environment, a belief in a higher power was distinctively reproductively advantageous. However, the environment has drastically changed since these times; the mere advent of civilization radically altered humans' living conditions. Not only has the global environment changed since prehistoric times, America's environment has been further transformed; as defined by an environmental encyclopedia, the United States, as a first world

³⁰ Henig

³¹ Hamer

³² "Inherited Traits." *UXL Complete Life Science Resource*. Ed. Julie Carnage and Leonard C. Bruno. Detroit: UXL, 2009. N. pag. Print.

³³ Pinker, Steven. "The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion." Madison, Wisconsin. 29 Oct. 2004. Speech.

country, is characterized by “an extensive infrastructure, mechanized production, efficient and fast transport networks, and pervasive use of high technology.”³⁴ Therefore, logically, if the environment that triggered an evolutionary modification has significantly changed, the trait could become less overwhelmingly prevalent in the species, as the selective pressures that encouraged this trait, like an unpredictable environment, would no longer exist, making the characteristic no longer helpful with survival or reproduction.³⁵ From this logic, a belief in a higher power should no longer be pervasively present in the human species.

And, for the most part, this logic holds true. In fact, America is one of the few first world countries³⁶ that diverges from this logical step. Furthermore, according to the Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism done in 2012, atheism is higher in more affluent countries.³⁷ Therefore, America stands out as an abnormality with a mere 5% atheism rate because it has an unusually low atheism rate compared to economically similar countries, like China’s 47% atheism and France’s 29%³⁸ and because, according to Darwin’s definition of natural selection, a belief in a higher power should become less prevalent with a drastically changed environment.

³⁴ "First World." *Environmental Encyclopedia*. Ed. Marci Bortman, Peter Brimblecombe, and Mary Ann Cunningham. 3rd ed. Vol. 1. Detroit: Gale Virtual Reference Library, 2003. 558-59. Print.

³⁵ For example, while the environment used to select against those with poor eyesight, as this trait would make one more vulnerable to attacks, these selective pressures no longer exist in twenty-first century America, making poor eyesight much more common.

³⁶ For the purposes of this paper, delineations in a country’s economic status will be used in comparing atheism rates, as a ‘first-world’ designation guarantees significant industrialization of that country, indicating a more drastic change in environment since ancient times. Culturally similar countries will not be considered as cultural similarities do not guarantee a drastically changed environment.

³⁷ Crabtree, Steve. "Religiosity Highest in World's Poorest Nations." *Gallup World*. Gallup, n.d. Web. 10 Feb. 2014 (See Appendix E)

³⁸ *Global Index of Religion and Atheism*.

This anomaly begs the question, then, of why does America have such a low atheism rate? First, it will be important to clarify the specifics of this WIN Gallup-Poll International study that found this statistic and drives this question. In the study, participants were given three choices of self-identification: religious, not religious, or convinced atheist.³⁹ The delineation between not religious and convinced atheist remains clear, visibly separating those who are merely not religious from those who are committed atheists, or people “who [maintain] that there is no God.”⁴⁰ For the purposes of this paper, the religiosity statistics cannot be used, as the question posed is in reference to attendance to a place of worship;⁴¹ this type of data could be swayed by tradition or social expectation, not by a genuine belief in a higher power. Conversely, a lack of belief in a higher power, or atheism, definitively demonstrates no spirituality, meaning no gene for spirituality; therefore, this data can be used. Then, to answer the question posed at the beginning of this paragraph, new environmental conditions have arisen in America that, instead of encouraging a belief in a higher power, discourage a lack of belief, or atheism. However, while the ancient environment’s cues produced an inheritable gene, resulting in a derived, or inherited, trait, the selective pressures in modern America have only led to acquired

³⁹ *Global Index of Religion and Atheism.*

⁴⁰ James

To clarify, an agnostic “maintains that it is not known or cannot be known whether there is a God.” James

⁴¹ *Global Index of Religion and Atheism.*

traits,⁴² characteristics that, while not inheritable, still can help the survival⁴³ of an individual. These acquired traits have expressed themselves through prejudice, political alienation, and cultural isolation, driven by America's perception of atheists.

Although atheists make up a small percentage of the American population, they receive significant prejudice, a stigma that discourages atheism. In an effort to investigate such prejudice, Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis and Douglas Hartmann conducted an extensive study at the University of Minnesota that was published in the *American Sociological Review* and that not only analyzes the results of their own work but also pulls together studies from Gallup Data and the American Mosaic Project Survey. As their work demonstrates, while acceptance of other minority groups has been rising since the '60's, atheism "provides a 'glaring exception' to the general rule of increasing social tolerance."⁴⁴ Furthermore, the three professors at the University of Minnesota assert that the number of religious minorities has increased in American, and "to be an atheist in such an environment is not to be one more religious minority among many in a strongly pluralist society"⁴⁵ but to be a completely different species among them. As prejudices against religious minorities have fallen away, "members of different religions...see each other as

⁴² *acquired trait*: n, a phenotype characteristic of an organism, that is acquired during the growth and development of an individual, [and] is not genetically based and so it cannot be passed on to the next generation. (Park, Chris. "A Dictionary of Environment and Conservation.": Oxford University Press, 2007. *Oxford Reference*. 2007. Date Accessed 9 Mar. 2014)

⁴³ In twenty-first century America, survival does not exclusively refer to the ability of human being to continue to live, but the term can apply to professional or social survival.

⁴⁴ Edgell, Penny, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann. "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society." *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211-34. Print. I will be referencing this source extensively as the paper pulls together various studies from Gallup Data and the American Mosaic Project Survey along with the University of Minnesota's own research.

⁴⁵ Edgell

the same instead of different.”⁴⁶ As a result, atheists seem less like the average American; this difference often triggers prejudice. In fact, in the University of Minnesota’s study, “rates of non-acceptance of atheists range from...34 percent...to...60 percent”⁴⁷ in groups extending from white males to Hispanic women. This nation-wide prejudice is directly related to the image of atheists in America. To the average American, atheists are “associated with drug use and prostitution [or] rampant materialists and cultural elitists.”⁴⁸ Either way, America’s picture of atheists is not favorable, connected with the idea of “self-interested individualists who are not concerned with common good.”⁴⁹ As a result, this preconceived image of an atheist may inhibit many from publicly admitting to atheism in America.

In addition, this image of atheists does not include a moral code. To a believer in a god, the “fear of God’s wrath...keeps people in line,”⁵⁰ meaning an atheist has no reason to conform to social or federal laws. As one participant in Edgell’s study comments “the prisons are probably filled with people who don’t have any kind of a spiritual or religious core;”⁵¹ while this view is not representative of all Americans, the opinion exemplifies America’s immediate inclination to relate atheism to lawlessness. As a result, this predetermined idea that atheists lack a moral code triggers a lack of trust in atheists. For example, in a study at the University of Oregon,

⁴⁶ Wade

⁴⁷ Edgell

⁴⁸ Edgell

⁴⁹ Edgell

⁵⁰ Hutson

⁵¹ Edgell

participants read about a man who committed a hit-and-run and then took money from an abandoned wallet. Afterwards, when asked to identify who the man was, the volunteers were “just as inclined to assume the character was an atheist as they were to think he was a rapist.”⁵² Similarly, University of British Columbia’s Will Gervais investigated “how atheism influences people’s hiring decisions.”⁵³ Regarding careers involving a high level of trust, like daycare work, “people were more likely to prefer the religious candidate,”⁵⁴ compared to low level trust jobs like waitressing. Therefore, this prejudice against atheists in American can help account for the low percentage of atheists, as admitting to atheism can hurt professional and personal success. Therefore, the new social cue of prejudice against atheists provides an impetus to not be an atheist, as Americans relate atheism to a deficiency in morality, leading to a lack of trust.

Furthermore, the set up of America’s government lends itself to discrimination against atheists. First, Edgell and her fellow researchers stress that under a democracy, “citizenship rests on the assumption of the ability of individuals to act responsibly to exercise rights.”⁵⁵ Therefore, if the common American instinct is to mistrust atheists, this wariness is only amplified within a democracy, where free will is a tenet of society. Supporting this statement, a study was recently conducted showing that “believers from countries with a strong secular rule of law showed markedly reduced political intolerance of atheists compared to believers from countries with a

⁵² Hutson

⁵³ Grewal, Daisy. "In Atheists We Distrust." *Scientific America*: n. pag. Print.

⁵⁴ Grewal
However, this statistic does not correlate with those identified as extremists within religious groups.

⁵⁵ Edgell

weak secular rule of law;⁵⁶ this result implies that America's emphasis on free will, typical of a democracy, and lack of intense punishment, characteristic of an autocracy, encourages discrimination against atheists. Furthermore, as "religious prejudice [waned], including a division between liberals and conservatives,"⁵⁷ atheists are increasingly identified as different from the average American. This difference permits discrimination, causing the new environment of democracy to discourage atheism.

Specific prejudice against atheism is demonstrated by presidential administrations as well. Soon after 9/11, John Ashcroft, former Attorney General, asserted that "civilized individuals, Christians, Jews and Muslims, all understand that the source of freedom and human dignity is the Creator."⁵⁸ With his rhetoric, Ashcroft intended to seamlessly unite the world's largest three monotheistic religions, motivated to unify the groups in light of the recent tragedy. However, in his desire to join the different religions together, Ashcroft was forced to alienate those without religion. With his language, Ashcroft sacrificed the inclusion of atheists to promote the Bush administration's larger goal, yet nonetheless, he isolated atheists from the majority. In fact, Ashcroft's small comment is representative of most of American politics. In order to succeed, candidates and political parties often align themselves with religion or with religious values; Richard Dawkins, a professor at Oxford University and devoted atheist, argues that Democrats and Republicans need to "parade their religiousness if they want to get elected."⁵⁹ By using

⁵⁶ Norenzayan, Ara, and Will M. Gervais. "Secular Rule of Law Erodes Believers' Political Intolerance of Atheists." *Religion, Brain and Behavior* (2013): n. pag. Print.

⁵⁷ Edgell

⁵⁸ Edgell

⁵⁹ Dawkins, Richard. *Richard Dawkins: Militant Atheism*. Youtube. Google, n.d. Web. 10 Feb. 2014.

religion to unify a voters, these political parties, intentionally or unintentionally, further divide atheists from the average American, cementing atheists' separate identity from the norm and providing Americans with a reason to not be an atheist.

Furthermore, presidents themselves often assist in alienating atheists; coming from such powerful leaders, their comments add weight and ethos to this type of sentiment. George Bush Sr. gave an example of such judgment when he firmly stated in 1987, “No, I don’t know that atheists should be considered citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.”⁶⁰ Not only did Bush Sr. express this opinion without hesitation, he “stood by it in the face of repeated calls for clarification or withdrawal,”⁶¹ demonstrating not only his unwavering belief but also his confidence that this statement would not jeopardize his campaign.⁶² This certainty in the expression of his opinion undoubtedly affected viewers, confirming their own prejudices by giving them a presidential stamp of approval. This same prejudice was shown less overtly during George Bush Jr.’s presidency in 2005 when he commented, “if you choose not to worship, you’re equally as patriotic as somebody who doesn’t worship.”⁶³ While seemingly harmless, the fact that Bush needed to clarify and qualify the nationalism of atheists meant that “the patriotism of the nonbelievers [had] effectively been called into question.”⁶⁴ With his statement, Bush brought atheists to the forefront of viewers’

⁶⁰ Dawkins, quoted from Bush Sr.’s formal news conference in Chicago, Illinois in 1987 while an incumbent vice-president

⁶¹ Dawkins

⁶² Dawkins

⁶³ Edgell

⁶⁴ Edgell

minds paired with the implication that there were doubts about their patriotism, even if he coupled the two ideas unintentionally; by needing to address atheists separately, Bush suggested that they were different from the average American. Furthermore, almost two decades after his father's comment, Bush was forced to address the country's stance on the acceptance of atheists, revealing that this minority was not seamlessly integrated into America.

However, the religious rhetoric of politicians reinforces the alienation of atheists in a much more subtle and consistent way than demonstrated by either Bush administration. For example, since Lincoln, all but two presidents have invoked God in their inaugural address and since World War I, every president has.⁶⁵ This consistency in presidential use of religious language indicates not only a general acceptance of this rhetoric but also the necessity of its use by a president; the absence of such language in an inaugural address would now stand out as markedly different. Furthermore, this use of religious vernacular supersedes political parties; in fact, President Obama mentioned God more than George W. Bush in both of their respective inaugurations,⁶⁶ despite Bush's overt religious reputation. In terms of presidents, a belief in a higher power seems to override an affiliation to a political party and, as Democrats and Republicans align due to a shared religiosity, atheists are yet again left out of the commonality, furthering the separation of this minority from the majority.

In addition, the prevalence of religious rhetoric implemented by successful politicians, like presidents, molds aspiring political candidates and current politicians to use such vernacular.

⁶⁵ Neuman, Scott. "Divine Rhetoric: God in the Inaugural Address." *It's All Politics*. NPR. Boston, 22 Jan. 2013. Print. Transcript.

⁶⁶ Neuman

Seeing a president who invokes a god not receive criticism for such language and seeing an audience willing to accept and align with such figures encourages politicians to follow a pattern that has proved successful in both the past and the present. As a result, a new selective pressure has emerged in American politics; this pressure is the consistent use of religious rhetoric by politicians. Just as an unpredictable environment selected for those with a belief in a higher power, a political environment saturated with the use of religious rhetoric selects for those who conform to this custom, giving the individual an edge in an election as opposed to a reproductive edge.⁶⁷ Furthermore, the precedent set by presidents to use religious rhetoric suggests to others in the political arena that this language is normal and acceptable.⁶⁸ As this religious vocabulary becomes standard in the political world, atheistic politicians become increasingly alienated as those who would not invoke a god, and atheistic voters become more isolated from a politician's target audience, again separating them from a cultural norm in America.

Lastly, Americans seem to stereotype atheists as people who go against the basic cultural and moral spirit of their country. First, a study was conducted at the University of Minnesota where participants were asked which American minority was most likely or not at all likely to "share your vision of American society;"⁶⁹ the volunteers put atheists in the latter group 39.6% of the time, compared to Muslims' 26.3%.⁷⁰ This study reveals that atheists are not homogenous with the average American's vision of his or her country, demonstrating that most Americans would

⁶⁷ While the former environment selected for an inherited trait, the present environment selects for an acquired trait.

⁶⁸ Neuman

⁶⁹ Edgell (See Appendix C)

⁷⁰ Edgell

reject a completely secular America. In believing America should not function without religion, Americans must believe their country to presently operate under religious values or on a communal belief in a god. Furthermore, 47.6% of participants reported that they would disapprove if their child wanted to marry an atheist, as opposed to the next highest group's, Muslims', 33.5%.⁷¹ In particular, this study demonstrates a very personal rejection of atheists, implying that not only is American society build upon religious values, but the typical American home is as well. As these studies indicate, most Americans view religiosity as "a basis for citizenship and a source of common American identity."⁷² Again, atheists are visibly alienated from the conventional American and his or her values. As typical Americans believe a common set of morals and beliefs binds the United States together, they will naturally connect with those most like themselves, or with people who hold similar ideals and values; this attraction could lead to a relationship, friendship, or job opportunity. Therefore, not only are atheists alienated by their divergence from the typical American's view of their country, they are also at a potential disadvantage when trying to make connections with others, making it more difficult to get a job or a relationship.

This built-in stigma of atheism reinforces its small representation in American society. A recent study fully showed how atheism can detract from professional success, as 54% of participants stated that they "would be unlikely to vote for a political candidate who is 'open about not believing in God;'"⁷³ comparatively, in another similar study, 59% of volunteers stated

⁷¹ Edgell

⁷² Edgell

⁷³ Edgell

they would be willing to vote for a homosexual.⁷⁴ As these multiple studies show, atheism can hurt professional and personal success in a very concrete way. In America, where “being a good American”⁷⁵ means accepting a core set of religious beliefs, atheists are continually isolated. Therefore, this intense stigma and resulting prejudice, political discrimination and cultural alienation all provide new social cues that discourage atheism in America; this “taboo word carrying frissons of hysterical phobia”⁷⁶ represses atheism just as prehistoric environments once encouraged a belief in a higher god through genetics.

However, this aversion to atheism may indicate a more serious issue for America. Though never officially written into law, the separation of church and state remains implicit in American politics. Yet, displayed through the previously mentioned presidential candidate study, religious beliefs do play a significant role in politics; in fact, belief in a religion seems to be considered a prerequisite for political office. This conglomeration of church and state is increasingly highlighted by America’s tiny atheistic population and discrimination against them; clearly, religious beliefs do matter to the average American. Significantly, as Patrick Allitt, professor of American History at Emory University, writes in the *Dictionary of American History*, the Supreme Court has made decisions explicitly dividing religiosity from education, “ruling that public-school children could not recite nondenominational prayer... could not read the Bible or recite the Lord's Prayer, and could not have the Ten Commandments posted in their

⁷⁴ Edgell (See Appendix B)

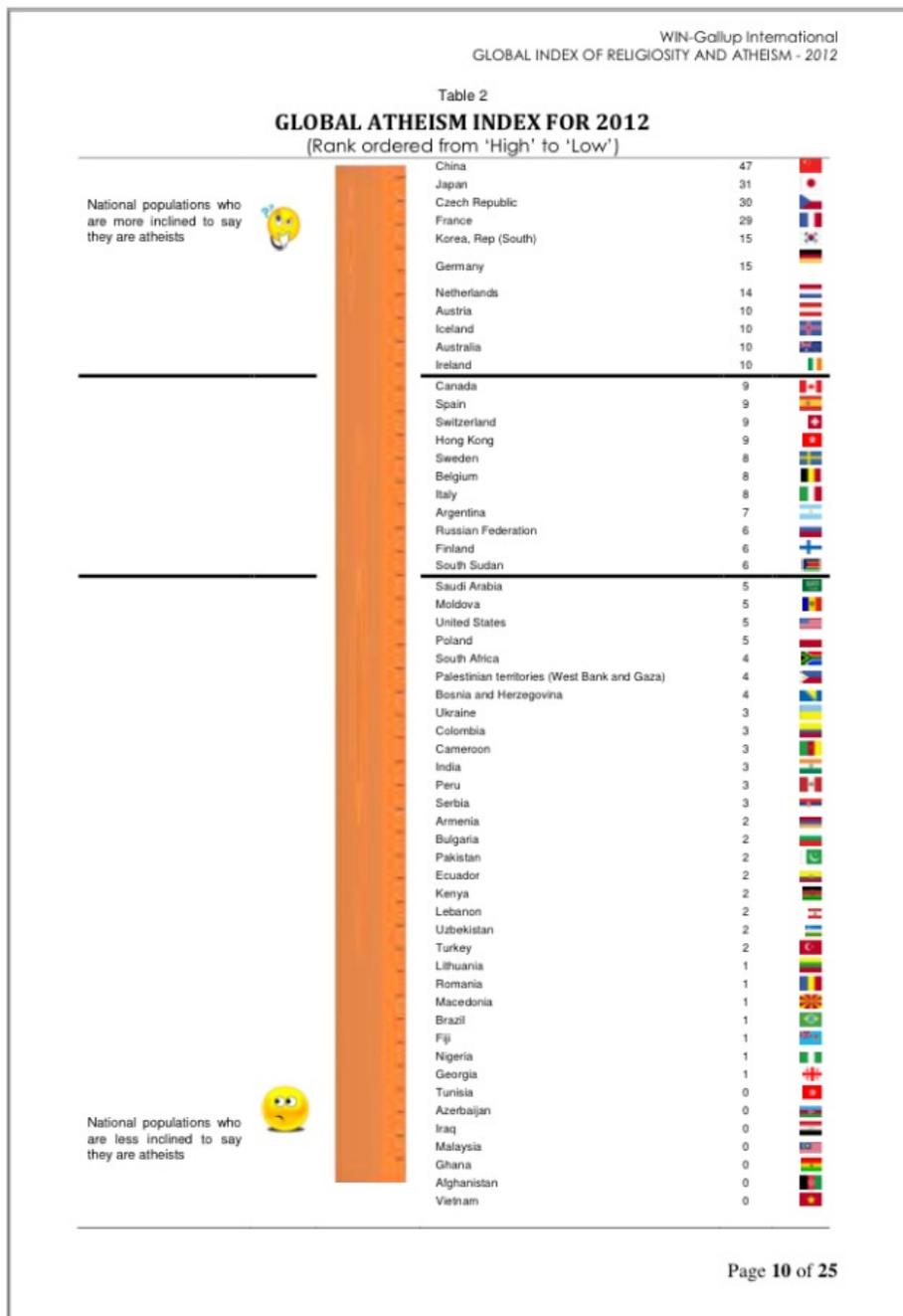
⁷⁵ Edgell (See Appendix B)

⁷⁶ Dawkins

classrooms.”⁷⁷ However, there are no such rules regarding religion in politics. This omission of a decision or of a clarification leaves the door wide open for the religious Right and other religion-driven organizations and lobbyist groups to influence politics, shunting atheists to the wayside. As a result, religion acts as a unifying force in twenty-first century America just as much as throughout history, but does that religious glue belong in the political arena?

⁷⁷ Allitt, Patrick N. "Church and State, Separation of." *Dictionary of American History*. Ed. Stanley I. Kutler. 3rd ed. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2003. 167-70. Print.

Appendix A: WIN-Gallup International Global Atheism Index for 2012⁷⁸



⁷⁸ *Global Index of Religion and Atheism.*

Appendix B: Willingness To Vote for Presidential Candidates⁷⁹

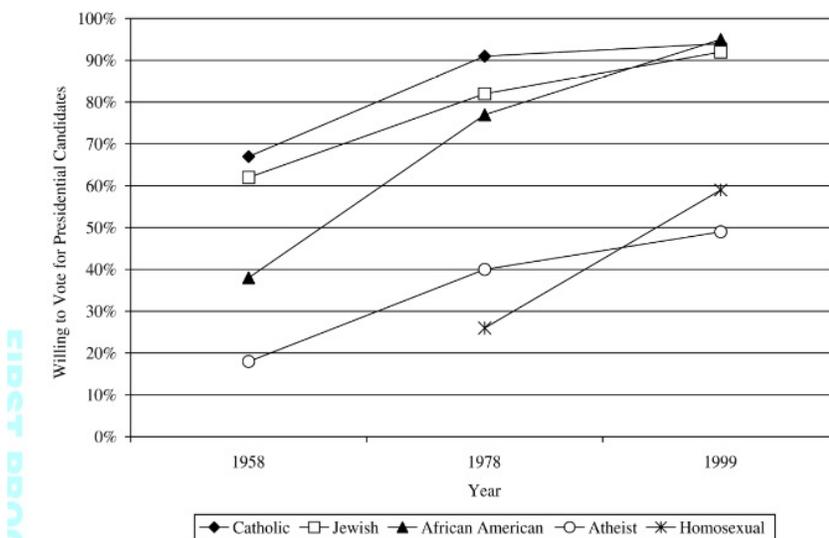


Figure 1. Gallup Data, Willingness to Vote for Presidential Candidates

Source: Report based on answers to Gallup question, "If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be (INSERT HERE), would you vote for that person?" Response categories: yes, no, no opinion (data retrieved July 1, 2005 at <http://gallup.com/poll/content/print.aspx?ci=3979>). The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ.

Appendix C: Public and Private Acceptance of Atheists⁸⁰

Table 1. Public and Private Acceptance, Ranked Groups

Responses	%
This Group Does Not At All Agree with My Vision of American Society	
Atheists	39.6
Muslims	26.3
Homosexuals	22.6
Conservative Christians	13.5
Recent Immigrants	12.5
Hispanics	7.6
Jews	7.4
Asian Americans	7.0
African Americans	4.6
White Americans	2.2
I Would Disapprove if My Child Wanted to Marry a Member of This Group	
Atheist	47.6
Muslim	33.5
African American	27.2
Asian American	18.5
Hispanic	18.5
Jew	11.8
Conservative Christian	6.9
White	2.3

Source: American Mosaic Project Survey, 2003.

⁷⁹ Edgell

⁸⁰ Edgell

Appendix D: Details of University of Minnesota's Twin Study⁸¹

Table 1. Means, standard deviations (SD), and ranges for age, measures of contact, IQ, and parental educational level for MZA twins. Two MZA male triplet sets were each entered as one set. Data are based on the first 56 sets of MZAs recruited, although the sample size varies slightly from measure to measure, as data are not always available or relevant (for example, rearing mother died very early in twins' life or twins could not be tested with an English language WAIS).

Statistic	Age (years)	Time together prior to separation (months)	Time apart to first reunion (years)	Total contact time (weeks)	IQ (WAIS)	Rearing father's education level (years)	Rearing mother's education level (years)
Mean	41.0	5.1	30.0	112.5	108.1	10.7	10.3
SD	12.0	8.5	14.3	230.7	10.8	4.5	3.7
Range	19.0–68.0	0–48.7	0.5–64.7	1–1233	79–133	0–20	0–19

Appendix E: Is Religion an Important Part of Your Daily Life?⁸²

Is religion an important part of your daily life?

Median responses among countries at each per-capita income level

Per-capita income	Yes	No
\$0-\$2,000	95%	5%
\$2,001-\$5,000	92%	7%
\$5,001-\$12,500	82%	17%
\$12,501-\$25,000	70%	28%
\$25,001+	47%	52%

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⁸¹ Bouchard

⁸² Crabtree

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