

For authors, a surprise: U.S. upbeat on diversity, but not on atheists

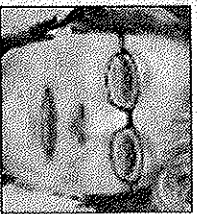
Earlier this year, as part of a 2,000-household survey on American attitudes on diversity, we made public our findings that atheists — a relatively small, unassuming and nonpolitical minority group — are the least-trusted people in America. They are also the



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minority group most Americans don't want their kids to marry and are "least likely to share the everyday American's vision of society."

The findings took us by surprise. Frankly, we thought atheists were a "throw-away" group in the sample. After all, atheists are neither high-profile nor organized, and they represent only about 3 percent of the country's population, a mere bay leaf in the melting pot of American culture.



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To boot, the results come at a time when fewer Americans are attending church than any time in the last 100 years, and if there was any clear "outsider" group identified in post-Sept. 11 America, we assumed it would be Muslims.

This anti-atheist sentiment is all the more puzzling because according to recent polls, Americans are decidedly upbeat about diversity, religious and otherwise. In fact, half of our

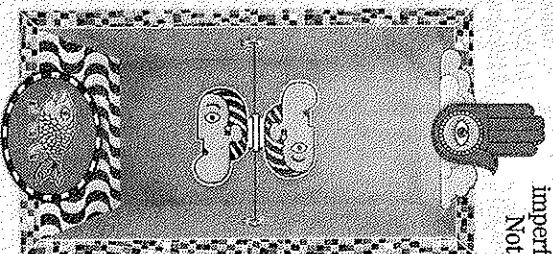


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survey respondents viewed cultural diversity as an unqualified social good, while almost no one was willing to say it was bad for the country. So what gives?

In America, culture and morality have historically been associated with religious belief and practice. This is one of our nation's great strengths and biggest vulnerabilities. Religion has been a powerful moral force in America, a power only intensified by the formal separation of church and state under our Constitution. In expressing concerns about atheists, Americans are really expressing their concerns about the moral foundations of "our" American solidarity. Because they do not believe in God, and fall outside traditional views of religions, atheists are assumed by most Americans to be unconcerned with the common good, unable to tell right from wrong, and just a few steps from the slippery slope of moral decline and social chaos.

Hard to imagine: Religion, however, is an



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imperfect proxy for morality. Not only are religious people capable of immoral acts, nonbelievers can be highly moral people. For many atheists, morality is based on law, contracts and understandings of human decency and mutual dependence rather than religious codes or beliefs. Yet most Americans can't imagine this, in part because most Americans don't actually know any self-avowed atheists.

Atheists themselves have worried that these findings may be a harbinger of increasing discrimination and mistreatment as religious minorities have been marginalized and excluded throughout American history. Muslim Americans, one of the minority communities perceived to be closest to atheists in our study, are only the most recent target; before that it was Jews and Catholics.

Lines and boundaries are necessary to any society — it's impossible to have a society, community or group of any kind without situating it in relation to all the other groups that it is not. There will always be individuals and groups pushed to the fringe because of their actions or philosophies. Our challenge as a diverse society is to understand those among us who are different and recognize the differences we truly need and those we simply need to tolerate, while never losing sight of the ties that bind us together.

More to come: In the coming year, the University of Minnesota's American Mosaic Project, a three-year project funded by the Minneapolis-based David Edelstein Family Foundation, will be releasing the results of our series of surveys on how Americans view race, religion and cultural diversity — ranging from how some Americans view their "whiteness," to our preoccupation with "diversity speak." Our findings will be posted on the American Mosaic Project's homepage at www.soc.umn.edu/amp.

And while we're still in the analysis phase of our project, we can say this — common to all findings is that as loving of difference and diversity as Americans may be, there are still points at which the everyday American draws the line.

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