

U of M study finds atheists are least trusted

Non-believers rank at the bottom as Mosaic study gauges how views of diversity are evolving in America.

Pamela Miller, Star Tribune

For one of Minnesota's most prominent atheists, a newly released study that found atheists are the least-trusted group in the United States has created a teachable moment.

"Most people do trust atheists -- they just don't know it," said August Berkshire, the spokesman for Minnesota Atheists. "That trusted family member, friend or neighbor might very well be an atheist."

The 2003 study, spearheaded by Penny Edgell, an associate professor of sociology at the University of Minnesota, found that atheists rank below several other minority groups, including immigrants, gays and lesbians, conservative Christians, Jews and Muslims, as "least likely to share everyday Americans' vision of society," Edgell said. "They're the new outsiders."

The telephone sampling of 2,081 households nationwide also found that atheists are the minority group most Americans least want their children to marry, she said.

"We were pretty surprised by the results," Edgell said. "We thought that in the wake of 9/11, people would target Muslims. Frankly, we expected atheists to be a throwaway group."

She said the study, whose overall goal was to gauge how views of diversity are evolving, shows "Americans are becoming more tolerant of racial and religious diversity, but those who aren't religious fall outside the range of tolerance."

Ninety percent of respondents thought whites and blacks could share their vision of society. About 80 percent said the same of Hispanics, Jews and conservative Christians. More than 70 percent said it of immigrants, and 64 percent said it of Muslims. Atheists had the lowest rating at 54 percent.

Followup interviews in 2004 found that many people "believe atheists have no sense of community and promote cultural elitism and the almighty dollar," Edgell said.

Such perceptions "tell us nothing about atheists themselves," she said. Atheists account for only 3 percent of the population, "so most people don't know any," she said.

Edgell said atheists are scapegoated in ways Catholics, Jews and Communists once were -- they are perceived to be on the other side of what Americans view as a symbolic moral boundary. "They're associated with moral and social disorder," she said.

For Berkshire, the study is a call to action. "More positive, friendly atheists need to be public about their world views -- not in an attempt to convert anybody, but to be a visible part of society," he said. "That would go a long way toward dispelling stereotypes."

He disputed the report's assertion that only 3 percent of Americans are atheists, citing other studies, including one from the City University of New York, that found that 14 percent of Americans identify themselves as "nonreligious."

He emphasized the university study's finding that "the more education people have, the more accepting they were." According to Edgell, people with more education, those with more exposure to diverse populations and those from the East and West coasts expressed the highest regard for atheists.

"When I became an atheist, I decided I wanted to live in a world where people were kind to each other," Berkshire said. "For this to happen, I had to follow my natural inclinations and be a kind person myself and do my part to help make the world a better place."

Atheists, he said, do support the common good, and members of Minnesota Atheists engage in a broad range of educational and cultural activities.

"We support multiculturalism, freedom of belief and nonbelief, and separation of church and state," he said. "These are core American values."

Belief in God, he said, "is no guarantee of good behavior and is too often used to justify bad behavior."

The study was the first in a series of national studies of race, religion and diversity conducted by the American Mosaic Project, funded by the David Edelstein Family Foundation of Minneapolis.

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