

Researchers study how humor matters in social movements

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The New Atheist Movement has found humor to be a useful tool in building identity.

For social movements whose members believe they are maligned and misunderstood in the broader culture, marginalization is no laughing matter. But as the New Atheist Movement demonstrates, humor can be an effective tool to build a movement's identity and develop strategies that empower members to operate in the realms of culture and politics, according to University of California, Riverside sociologist Katja Guenther.

In a paper presented today at the 109th Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association in San Francisco, Guenther and graduate students Kerry Mulligan and Natasha Radojic analyzed the use of

humor by the New Atheist Movement, which since the early 2000s has come to dominate atheist organizing in the United States. The movement is open to atheists, agnostics, freethinkers and humanists who want to promote the separation of church and state and reduce the stigma of being irreligious in America.

In "How Humor Matters in Social Movements: Insights from the New Atheist Movement," the researchers noted that the movement "represents a break from secular politics with its emphasis on coming out as atheist, generating atheist pride, and promoting activism by atheists to achieve diverse goals. Although the movement disavows proselytizing, it seeks to promote critical thinking and scientific reasoning, and routinely challenges the tenets of religious faith."

Guenther, the lead author of the paper, and her co-authors found that humor is important to the New Atheist Movement in several ways:

- It creates an opportunity to build a sense of collective identity among diverse participants.
- It breaks the ice and relaxes people, which can be especially beneficial for newcomers.
- It is a central part of the movement's identity, and to atheistic identity more generally.

"To be an atheist is to be funny," Guenther wrote, and is used frequently to highlight atheistic beliefs and establish boundaries between insiders and outsiders.

For example, many New Atheist Movement events include presentations from former religious leaders. One Pentecostal minister-turned-atheist exhorts audiences to yell "Darwin!" at moments when a minister might ask the congregation to yell "Amen!" in a sermon. Some atheists reference the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster (which says its

members believe that life was created by an intelligent creature made of spaghetti noodles) to ridicule all religious belief.

"Framing atheists as pro-science and religious believers as anti-science further highlights differences between atheists and religious people, and also connects the New Atheist Movement to a host of policy issues, like teaching evolution in schools, reproductive rights, and the role of faith in medicine," Guenther wrote.

Humor has been a useful tool in framing this position, for example, bumper stickers of a dinosaur eating the fish used to symbolize Jesus and slogans such as "My dinosaur ate your Jesus fish."

"The movement seeks to make a mockery of religious believers and religious institutions by highlighting the absurdity of [religious belief](#) and the outrageousness of the actions of some religious believers," Guenther said. "Humor for this particular social movement may be especially advantageous because ... it offers a relatively non-threatening challenge to religion, while simultaneously causing people some discomfort and forcing them to rethink their religious views."

While Catholics and Mormons, who have long been derided by other Christians, are fair game, Guenther noted, "Jews, who have a history of violent persecution, are not a group that atheists can ridicule. Islam tends to be treated primarily as a threat and less as a subject of jokes, likely reflecting dominant cultural beliefs about Islam as frightening and problematic. Buddhism, which is a major world religion, receives almost no attention of any kind, apparently because it is viewed as both irrelevant in the American context and as non-threatening."

"How Humor Matters in Social Movements" builds on Guenther's previous research on the New Atheist Movement. A paper published earlier this year in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* responded to

research showing that atheists are the most disliked and distrusted social group in the U.S. by looking at how atheists see religious believers.

In that paper, "Bounded by Disbelief: How Atheists in the United States Differentiate Themselves from Religious Believers," the sociologist found that atheists view religious believers as misguided, foolish, and even dangerous, in contrast to their understanding of religious non-believers as intelligent, thoughtful, and beneficial to society.

"In this way, atheists challenge dominant conceptualizations of atheists as immoral heathens and assert that atheists have value as people and as citizens," she explained.

Guenther, Mulligan and UCR undergraduate Cameron Papp examined how atheist activist organizations rely on the inclusion of apostates to grow the movement and solidify collective identity in a paper published in *Social Problems* in 2013.

"From the Outside In: Crossing Boundaries to Build Collective Identity in the New Atheist Movement" uses the 950-member Inland Empire Atheists, Agnostics, and Skeptics in Southern California as a case study to examine the importance of apostates in establishing a common enemy and delineating who and what their members are not.

"Conversion stories reaffirm the idea that atheists are right and religion is wrong," Guenther explained. "The more people who convert to atheism the more this claim is supported." They also help to reinforce the boundary between atheists and religious people in terms of goodness, fairness and rationality. "When members need evidence to differentiate atheists from religious believers, apostates' stories are readily available."

More study of American [atheists](#) is needed, with particular attention to why they are "taking an open and visible stand against stigmatization and

exclusion in the contemporary U.S. and other nations after a long history of invisibility," Guenther said. Their new level of activism has the potential "to shape American attitudes about morality, religion, and the relationship between church and state," she said.

Provided by University of California - Riverside

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