

# Coming Out - Atheism: The Other Closet

by Dave Silverman

**American Atheists**  
info@atheists.org or  
www.atheists.org

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*Coming out of the closet is a term most associated with gays and lesbians announcing to the world that they are homosexual. Few regret it, having found their way toward a more open and satisfying life.*

But there is another closet which is hiding a different minority: atheists. Many of us, like many gays of previous decades, hide in the shadows due to fear of hostility and aversion to confrontations.

But we can't stay in the closet any longer. The Christian Right, in their never-ending quest to make everyone Christian, has unleashed an unparalleled slew of efforts aimed at Christianizing the country. On top of legislation, constitutional amendments, and publicity, the religious right have engaged in a war of words and slander against their greatest enemy: the logic and common sense of atheism. The Bible goes so far as to forbid contact with atheists (Corinthians 6:14), thereby stemming debate and preventing the incursion of logical, non-religious ideas entering the flock. Similar behavior is seen in religious cults, where new members are not even allowed to contact non-cult family members.

As a result of this policy, atheists are vilified as anarchistic and evil anti-religionists, who want nothing more than to rob other people of their right to practice their beliefs. Only a small portion of atheists are open (out of the closet) about their atheism, and as a result we are viewed as a much smaller percentage of the population than we really are. In other words, the legislators are paying less attention to us than they should. In still other words, the Christian Right are winning.

The objective of this article is to help reverse the progress made by those who oppose freethought by assisting nonbelievers in being more open about their atheism. For some people, coming out as an atheist can be as difficult as anything they've ever done, and this is not necessary. To that end, I will guide readers through the basic steps of "outing" themselves, first addressing the definition of atheism and the benefits - and extents - of open freethought.

## **What is atheism?**

The definition of an atheist is someone who is "without theism". As atheists, we see God as a legend or fairy tale, and equate God with Santa Claus and Zeus. If you actively disbelieve that Santa and Zeus exist, yet can find no reason that God should be given more credibility (I certainly cannot), you are an atheist by most definitions.

Whatever you may call yourself, be it atheist, agnostic, freethinker, or anything else, this guide is geared toward you and helping you become more comfortable telling others about your views.  
**What Are Atheists Like?**

So what are atheists like? It's hard to say. To me, one of the best components of atheism is the freedom of thought and mind. Prejudice against people of other sexes, races, or sexual preferences is rare, because most of such prejudice is religion-based and completely illogical. We argue with each other, thrive on debate, and feel like we're better people after we've been proven wrong. We do good because it's the right thing to do, not out of a selfish fear of eternal damnation or a need to "win points" with a deity.

Other than that, we are a very diverse group of people. We are writers and poets, philosophers and scientists, teachers and businesspeople, brain surgeons and truck drivers, architects and construction workers. We are men and women, black and white, republican and democrat, gay and straight, shy and outspoken. Since we are bound only by our disbelief, there are atheists with differing views on every political, economic, and social issue. I view this as a benefit which should serve as a model from which the rest of the world could learn. Atheists are united in diversity.

We are moral, we are ethical, and we're tired of being defamed and maligned for our disbelief. Sound familiar?

### **Why Come Out?**

While the reasons for staying in the closet seem valid, the reasons for coming out far outweigh those for hiding.

You are hiding yourself right now. There is a part of you that you're not allowing other people to know, because of fear of rejection. As a result, those who love you are ignorant of a side of your personality. Would it change their minds about you should they find out? Possibly, but wouldn't you rather know for sure? Do you really think they'd reject you completely if they knew? In most cases, this is not so. In fact, a huge percentage of atheists I know, all of them, in fact, have at least cordial relationships with those family members who are religious. In all reality, religion is rarely as important as the love of a family member, even to the most pious.

How do you feel about hiding? Don't you feel that you're being oppressed for no reason? Do you feel like a second-class citizen, or that your acquaintances think atheism is something of which to be ashamed?

The fact is, that there is nothing shameful about atheism. Rather, it should be viewed as a major accomplishment. Most people stick with the religion in which they were raised, never thinking or examining the reasons why. Those that switch religions (or sects of a particular religion) often never truly question the belief in a god. Those that do should be proud that they have searched and reached an educated conclusion, and so should you.

As an atheist, you have broken out of the cycle of doing what you're told because someone says God says so. You think for yourself, you are self reliant, and you are responsible for your own

actions and decisions. Showing yourself is your next great decision.

### **Degrees of "Outness"**

There are degrees to which one is open about his or her atheism. While there is often overlap, these are the degrees as I see them:

**Degree 1:** Completely closeted. Not even your spouse knows. You tell everyone you're a believer, and you may even attend church services to convince those around you. You're living a lie, terrified that someone may learn the truth.

If you fit into this category something must change in the near term. Your spouse, who loves and trusts you for who you are, needs and has the right to know.

**Degree 2:** Mostly secret. Your spouse knows, but most of your family and friends don't. You avoid the subject at all costs at work, and if it does come up, you will hide your atheism.

**Degree 3:** Somewhat open. Some family members and most friends know, but you are hesitant to bring it up in conversation. It's still a secret at work, unless you are very close friends with a coworker or two who know. You have friends who are atheists, and may belong to an organization like American Atheists for moral support and connectivity. You may write a letter to a congressperson, but not to the local paper, because you don't really want your atheism published. You may avoid the subject when it comes up, but if pressed you will not call yourself a believer (though you may soften the blow by using the term "agnostic" or "freethinker", even if you're an atheist by definition).

**Degree 4:** Mostly open. Almost anyone who knows you knows you don't practice religion. Coworkers, perhaps including your boss, all your friends and your entire family is aware. You don't shout it from rooftops, but you make no effort to hide your atheism when it comes up in conversation, and may occasionally raise the conversation yourself.

**Degree 5:** Completely open. Every time the subject comes up, you state your disbelief with pride and frankness. Anyone who doesn't like you because of your atheism is a bigot and is not your concern. You've written letters to the editors of newspapers on the topic, and you may have an atheist bumper sticker on your car.

### **Coming out: How, when, and how soon.**

If you find yourself in the first two degrees, then you have work to do. Your self-isolation is unhealthy, both mentally and physically, and you need to rectify it. Your goal is degree 3 (ultimately 5, but 3 is the short-term minimum), and it's actually quite easy to get there.

The first step, after admitting your atheism to yourself, is to be with people like you, and the easiest way to do this is to join an atheist group. No, this is not a shameless plug for you to join American Atheists, but it is a plea to join something. You have no idea how great it is to walk into a room full of people and know that they are ALL atheists and think you're right. It's the easiest way to make atheist friends and develop a power base from which to draw when confronting the other people in your life.

There are basically three types of people in everyone's lives that have influence: friends (including spouses), Family (blood relatives), and coworkers. It has been my experience that coming out to people in this order is usually best.

Friends are easy to tell about your nonbelief. Why? Because we choose our friends. People tend to prefer to be with those like themselves, so while it may not be so that your friends are atheists, it is unlikely that these people are so intolerant toward atheists that they are going to reject you for it. Chances are, since they are your friends, they will support your right not to believe and continue to be your friend even if they don't agree with you.

The one exception to this is if you are a "born-again atheist", that is a recent convert from religious belief. If this is the case, then you will possibly need to find new friends with like interests, as your old friends, still being very pious, may reject you at least at first. Again, the Bible actively prohibits association with atheists. You may try to point this out to your friends as the bigoted text that it is, and if your friendship is worth something to them, you may still be able to keep the friendship alive.

Family may be the most difficult to tell. On one hand you feel a need for support from parents and siblings (and sometimes children) whom you love, yet on the other hand you feel guilty for holding back such a significant secret. With family, you don't have the same advantage as you do with friends, in that people from the same family can more often have extremely different beliefs. Therefore, the possibility exists for rejection and "cold-shouldering" from your own flesh and blood.

Despite the fact that they may not like what they hear, for the most part, they need to know. Religious parents are often the most dismayed, having "failed" to bring up a good religious child. In all frankness, however, deep down they would not rather you lie to them or hide such an important aspect of yourself from them.

The exception to this rule is if you are a child or are otherwise dependant on a parent you are sure would expel you from home if they knew. Freedom of religion and respecting yourself is important, but not more important than having a roof over your head. In this case, you may want to wait for independence before announcing your atheism.

Coworkers are easy. They usually don't care, and it's frankly none of their business what your beliefs are in the first place. You can go all the way through Degree 4 and still not tell your coworkers. As with a parent, don't come out if you think you're going to lose your job. If you are uncomfortable with the situation, postpone your announcement until the situation changes and you are more secure.

Some of your coworkers are your close friends, and will therefore fall into the earlier category. However, remember that those who are not close friends may spread your news faster than you can, and that people may find out who you'd really rather not know. It is therefore important to say that this decision is different from coming out to friends and family and needs to be handled independently. If you decide to come out at work, follow the same rules for friends.

## **Coming Out - Doing it.**

Ok, so now you've decided/realized that you're an atheist, and you're about to tell the people you know about it. Exactly how is it done?

There are three simple rules to follow when coming out as an atheist, which I've found to be quite helpful.

1. Be confident. Don't come out by saying "I'm thinking that I'm having some doubts about religion." This will only invite people to try to "save you before it's too late." When you tell people, state it with no uncertain terms, in the present tense, and make sure to convey that you've come to an educated decision. Try something like "after a lot of soul searching and talking to a lot of people, I've decided to give up on religion" or "I've been an atheist for some time now, so I won't be going to church with you anymore."

Smile, be confident, and proud. This is an accomplishment not a shame. This is a good thing you want to share with your loved ones. If you convey this attitude, the people you are telling may receive these signals, which may make the situation go a little easier.

2. Be Compassionate. Yes, YOU be compassionate to THEM. Understand that the people you tell love you, and actually believe in God and their preachers' teachings. They are victims - just as you are - of the lies and falsehoods told by religious organizations, the only difference being they actually may believe those lies. They may express their emotions as anger, but a little education and steadfastness mixed with understanding may allow them to get over that hump quickly.

Make sure you tell your parents that they succeeded (instead of failed) in raising you as a person who makes his/her own decisions and does not follow blindly. They did a good job. Tell them you're happy, and, at the end, let it slip in that this is your decision and that they have no reason to be hurt or to judge you, and that you're grateful for their acceptance and love.

3. Hope for the Best, but prepare for the worst. The best is obviously "I'm an atheist too" or "so what" but don't count on it. As I said earlier, friends are easier than anyone else, and are less likely to reject you because of your atheism. I've lost potential friendships because of it, but never an established friend (even the most pious ones). However, be prepared for all the standard questions from "you're going to Hell" to "does this mean you pray to Satan" to "How could you do this to me?" from loved ones and family members.

The best defense for this is to have answers for questions at the ready. You know your people better than anyone, and are best suited for guessing what those questions might be. Below are some frequently-used statements and some suggested counterpoints for your reference:

- "Atheists have no morals, since they don't believe in God" - What a sad world it is when people can seriously say that humans need to fear eternal damnation in order to do good.

Humans have the idea of right and wrong imbedded in them by their own brains, as well as their upbringing and society. Atheists do good, not out of fear of reprisal, but because it's the right thing to do. We value family, society, culture, and, of course, freedom. Many of us will - and have - defend these values with our lives.

Examples:

- Slavery was not only acceptable 200 years ago, it was considered a good deed by many, and defended using the bible. The bible was also used to justify the Holocaust, the Crusades, and the Spanish Inquisition. This shows that the bible can be used to defend even the most immoral and unethical ideals, and is therefore not an adequate yardstick to measure moral or ethical behavior.
  - Mention bad religious people. Remember that Hitler was a Catholic, and that Jeffrey Dahmer said grace before he ate his victims. Mention also that one need only open a newspaper to find yet another story about allegations against priests for sexual misconduct, often with children. Don't forget our good friends Jim Bakker (who swindled millions from his flock) and Jimmy Swaggart (asked for forgiveness only after being caught using prostitutes).
  - Always couple these statements with the fact that, while atheists make up 8-10% of the population at large, we only make up 1% of the population in prison. I mean, think of it, what if 8-10% of the population (on top of all the religious criminals) decided it was OK to steal, rape, and murder? We'd have chaos! These will serve to prove that religion and ethical behavior are not even slightly related.
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- "Atheists believe in evolution, but that doesn't answer as many questions as creationism"- Atheism is not a scientific theory, rather a lack of religion. We do believe in science, and that all questions will eventually be answered with science if they are not answered today, but we readily admit that not all answers are known to us right now. That is no reason, however, for inventing a fictional god to whom to give credit, especially when all it does is create more questions. Science has done well so far, giving theories regarding evolution, geological movement, and the Big Bang, all supported by evidence, but not necessarily endorsed by all atheists.
  - "Atheists cannot know there is no God, since you cannot prove he doesn't exist" - Again, this is a two sided coin, but the theists are loathe to admit the other side. Atheists don't need to prove the non-existence of God, any more we need to prove the nonexistence of Zeus or Santa Claus. Can theists prove God over any alternatives? Of course not. Nobody can prove God exists, yet they will stand on their heads saying they're sure. Well, if they can be sure despite evidence to the contrary, we can be sure in light of evidence in support of atheism.

- "Atheists seek to remove religion from society, and to force all people to be atheists" - Absolutely wrong. We seek only the freedom for people to make their choice on their own, free of intervention from the government or public school system. We seek the freedom not to support religion through taxes, forced participation, or special privileges of any kind. That being said, your thoughts are your rights, and none of our business. Wear your jewelry, celebrate your holidays, and pray in your house, church, or in public if you like. Just don't force your religion on other people. That's what we're all about.
- "Atheists are so closed-minded, they can't see that miracles happen every day!" - Some people look for miracles where none exist (they never do). Allow me to put things in perspective: Someone's cancer going into remission is no miracle, but we can talk when disease suddenly disappears from the face of the earth overnight without help from medical science. Food getting through to a hungry village: human perseverance. Starvation vanishing from earth without a reason overnight: Miracle. One more time: A child is born - science; The spontaneous end of birth defects - Miracle. Got it?

Note: only good things are miracles, so volcanoes, tornadoes, and hurricanes don't count. Just for good measure, I also wanted to list some good questions to have as support for your reasoning to be an atheist. NOTE: These may start or worsen a fight, and are to be used sparingly. They are dangerous questions which can only be answered with "the lord works in mysterious ways" or the like. You also might get the old "you're asking questions about God, so you must believe in Him" speech. This is easily countered by saying that it's easier to prove the bible wrong using the bible itself, and that your arguments do not constitute an acknowledgement of God's existence any more than a discussion about Greek mythology would prove a belief in Zeus.

Use these only when you are sure of a congenial discussion, and be prepared to agree to disagree.

- If God is all-powerful, why did he take 6 days to create the universe, resting on the 7th? Why didn't he just snap his proverbial fingers and create everything all at once, and not need rest afterwards? Doesn't sound so all-powerful to me.
- If God knows the future, why does he make mistakes? He should have known he would regret the flood, and that Sodom and Gomora would be full of sinners, etc.
- Why does God need to be "served", and why can't we do it from heaven?
- Yes, we have free will, but God already knows who will sin, who will accept Him, etc, for all eternity (since he has perfect knowledge of the future). Why then, are we here? Why not just send our souls to Heaven or Hell, depending on what he knows we'll do?
- Why does God care if he is praised? He is this all-knowing, super being, why does he care if we mere humans give him credit for creating the universe?
- How can you justify the fact that this merciful, loving god is sending all non-Christians to Hell, no matter how good they are? Even those from before Christ was born went to hell.

However, terrible people, including Hitler and Jeffrey Dahmer, could go to Heaven if they accepted God before death.

- Why does this wonderful, forgiving God hold Adam's sin over all our heads? Why must we all pay for this by being permanent sinners? If God was so pissed, why didn't he just kill Adam and Eve and start over? Again, this is God's choice, so they're going to have to explain why God CHOOSES to hold this incredible grudge.
- Where did God come from? How did he get created? Why is it a valid argument to say that He "always existed", but an invalid argument to say the same thing about matter and energy?

Once you've both agreed to disagree, you've successfully outed yourself to that person. Avoid that awkward post discussion silence, making sure the discussion has completed, and not that the person to whom you are speaking is searching for words to continue. The best thing to do is change the subject to something positive, smile, and get on with your relationship with this person. S/he may need some time to adapt, but it will be made easier if you be yourself and show your happiness at being free of the closet.

### **Conclusion**

You've already taken the first step by getting to the end of this article and proudly admitting you're an atheist. However, being an atheist is more than just not believing in God. You're one of 25 million freethinkers in this country who will not follow blindly and who feel free to demand proof, or at least logically sound theory. Welcome.

Your first responsibility (to you, not to us) is to make yourself known, to friends, family, other atheists, and your congresspeople. Come meet with us and get some foundation. We can help make this episode in your life much easier than it would be alone.

Be a proud, open, honest atheist, not another closeted victim of the Christian Right.