CALL FOR SUBMISSIONS

Atheists in America: Narratives from an Invisible Minority
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Atheists in America: Narratives from an Invisible Minority is a book that aspires to tell the stories of diverse individuals who identify as atheist in the increasingly conservative religious climate of the United States. The preponderance of recently published books about atheism (e.g., works by Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett) may suggest that secularism has permeated the zeitgeist, yet, other sources suggest that mainstream society is far from embracing atheism as a respectable social orientation. Specifically, national opinion polls from past and current decades consistently paint Americans as wary, fearful, or even disgusted by atheists (Gervais, 2011). For example, a 2006 Gallup Poll found that 84% of Americans surveyed endorsed that “America is not ready for an atheist president” and nearly 50% of Americans polled agreed with the statement “I would disapprove if my child wanted to marry an atheist” (cited in Edgell, Gerteis, & Harmann, 2006). As illustrated by the preceding examples, the spaces for atheist individuals to exist in the United States have been largely limited throughout history—resulting in many atheist people deciding to conceal their beliefs from friends, family, coworkers, and members of their religious congregations.

Discussed by Cimino and Smith (2011), the practice of “coming out” as atheist has never been a matter of publicly identifying as atheist along a well-worn and legitimate path; instead, coming out involves emerging from invisibility to claim a personal and social identity that carries widespread stigma. There are few examples of “out” atheists in political offices, on sports teams, or within popular media and celebrity culture—leaving atheist individuals little opportunity to model their coming out process on the experiences of others. Thus, Atheists in America has two main objectives:

The primary objective of the book is to present personal narratives that will illustrate how people from different cultures, religious backgrounds, cities, ages, sexual orientations, and family structures have reached their identities as atheist. Beyond identity development processes, the second objective of the book is to elucidate some of the many coming out routes for atheist individuals and shed light on how atheist people navigate social systems and decisions to conceal or reveal their beliefs to others.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR PROSPECTIVE CONTRIBUTING AUTHORS

Submission deadline: June 1, 2012

I am gathering personal narratives that speak to the “coming out as atheist” journeys of diverse nonreligious individuals across the United States. Narratives can address a number of specific themes and topics (e.g., dating, parenting, disclosing identity to religious family members).

Atheists in America: Narratives from an Invisible Minority is under contract with Columbia University Press, one of the most well-established and prestigious academic presses in the world. Your submissions may be edited for length/content. Please email melanie.brewster@tc.columbia.edu with the prospective topic of your essay and with any questions. Feel free to be open, creative, and conversational in crafting your narrative essay. The “coming out” stories of contributing writers should each be about 1,500 to 4,000 words with content that aligns closely with one of the themes outlined below:

1. Cultural Contexts in Coming Out as Atheist
Submitted narratives will speak to the personal experiences of culturally, ethnically, racially, and regionally diverse people who have navigated coming out as atheist. For example, authors could include discussions of “coming out” as atheist in African American communities in the South, in heavily Mormon parts of Utah, in rural Latino communities across the United States, or in relation to other diverse identities.

2. Leaving Faith: Arriving at Atheist Identity from Religious Backgrounds
Submitted narratives must discuss individuals’ personal processes of coming to identify as atheist through disentangling themselves from specific religious faiths and communities (e.g., Catholicism, Hasidic Judaism, Muslim). Submissions should address how the authors navigated leaving their faiths, coming out as atheist, and making meaning for their lives without the guidance of their past religious beliefs.
3. Two Closets? Identifying as both LGBTQ and Atheist
Submitted narratives will speak to the personal experiences of individuals who identify as both LGBTQ and atheist. These essays should describe how LGBTQ individuals navigate their dual (or adjacent) coming out processes. For example, authors could consider how their religious (or irreligious) beliefs informed their sexual or gender identity development – and vice versa.

4. Navigating Atheism and Family Life: Telling and Hiding
Submitted narratives will address the challenges of identifying as atheist in religious families. Narratives will pay particular attention to the discussion of religiosity and power dynamics within your family. Sub-topics addressed by authors might include – what it was like to tell your siblings, parents, grandparents, etc. How did you decide who to tell first? Did you hint at being atheist or come out and say it? What were the ramifications of your disclosure?

5. Parenting as Atheist and Coming Out to Children
Submitted narratives will depict the struggles and rewards of being a parent and atheist while raising children in a largely religious nation. Specifically, stories may focus on how parents have “come out” to their children, learned to adapt cultural religious celebrations in their families, dealt with educating their children about their beliefs, or navigated parenting as a non-religious person a religious family.

6. Atheism at Work: Tales of Disclosing to Coworkers and Colleagues
Submitted narratives will discuss authors’ decision-making around coming out at work and to coworkers, supervisors, and customers. Narratives should discuss the risks and benefits of talking about atheist identity in the workplace.

7. The Search for Connection: Coming out to Friends and Questing for Community
Submitted narratives will highlight the process of building community and friendships while being “out” as atheist. Specific personal narratives might discuss (1) maintaining relationships with religious friends after leaving a faith, (2) looking for likeminded social networks in largely religious regions of the U.S., and (3) deciding what is “important” in friendships – for example, do your friends need to have similar values and beliefs?

8. Dating and Disclosing: Navigating Romantic Relationships as an Atheist Person
Submitted narratives will illustrate atheist individuals’ experiences of “coming out” to potential, past, or current romantic partners. Specific stories may explore decisions regarding when and how to share information about atheist identity while dating – for example, do you put it on your match.com profile or do you wait until date #3? How important is it for you to be in a relationship with someone who is also atheist? Was your atheism ever a “deal-breaker” for a romantic partner?

9. Reintegrating Spirituality with Atheism: Challenges and Satisfactions
While many atheist individuals may not choose to integrate elements of spirituality or religious practice into their lives once they “come out” as atheist, some individuals may rejoin (or continue in) a religious or spiritual practice. Submitted narratives should speak to the experiences of atheist people who have decided to (re)immerse themselves in a spiritual or religious practice. Topics to consider may include: how did you come to that particular faith or spiritual practice? How do you make sense of your atheism in relation to your spirituality? What are the satisfactions and challenges you face in being atheist while still practicing a religion or spiritual belief?

10. Atheism and Aging: Challenges of Entering Older Adulthood as a Non-Believer
Activities for the elderly become increasingly ”church-centric” when age increases and levels of mobility begin to decrease. As such, elderly atheist individuals may experience feelings of isolation. Submitted narratives should address the process of entering older adulthood, finding community and purpose, and confronting mortality as an atheist person.

11. Staying in “The Other Closet” – Decisions to Not Disclose
Submitted narratives will discuss personal decisions to keep atheist identity concealed. Authors will discuss their thoughts and feelings surrounding their decisions to stay “closeted” as atheist in various spheres of their lives.