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ACCEPTING THE NON-RELIGIOUS?

THE CASE OF ATHEISTS IN THE UNITED STATES

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Abstract

One statistic seems to resist change: 46%. It is the proportion of citizens in the United States who declare today (and this number has been constant for the past 30 years) that they would not vote for an atheist. In comparison, more than 90% of Americans say they would be willing to vote for a candidate who is a woman, an African-American or a homosexual.

This paper sheds light on the perception of atheists as an imaginary counterpoint to the good citizen in the United States. Drawing on a one-year ethnographic observation, we analyze the characterizations of the category “atheist” by parishioners of a Catholic church in Northern California.

Atheists are described as “sociopaths” or as “socially deviant”. This points to the very powerful impact which religious belief has on political behavior and cultural membership. Belief in God – rather than membership in an organized religion – becomes a proxy to determine who belongs to the political community, to the “us”, and who is characterized as an enemy.

The paper interrogates the violence of those characterizations and their social meaning in the American context.

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One statistic seems to resist change: 46%. It is the proportion of citizens in the United States who declare today (and this number has been constant for the past 30 years) that they would not vote for an atheist. In comparison, more than 90% of Americans say they would be willing to vote for a candidate who is a woman, an African-American or a homosexual (USA Today/Gallup 2007).[1]

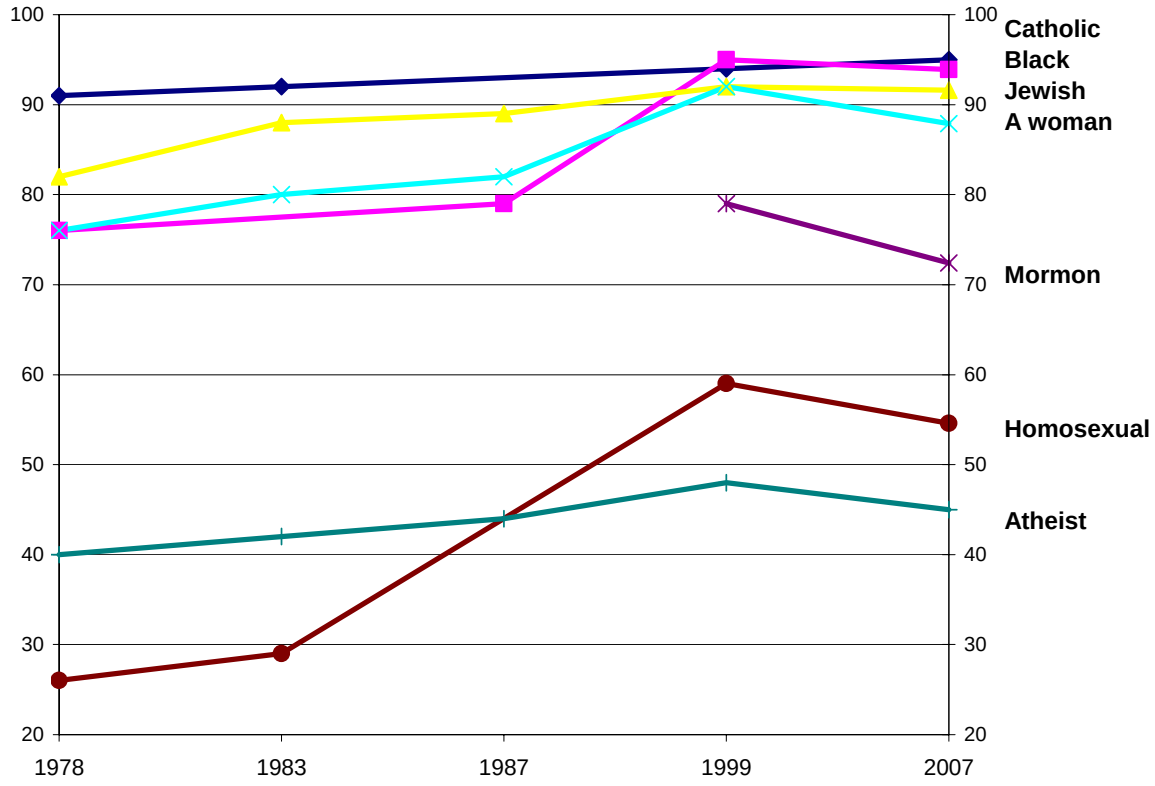


Figure 1: Percentage of the population who would vote for a [*characteristic*] candidate nominated by their party.
Source of the data: Gallup Poll, 02/09-11/2007; 02/19-21/1999; 07/10-13/1987; 04/29/1983-05/02/1983; 07/18/1978[2].

In its first article, section 4, the Texas Constitution states that no religious test shall be required as a qualification for public office, and prohibits that anyone be excluded from

[1] Gallup Poll 02/19/1999-02/21/1999 shows that 48 percent of Americans would vote for a candidate who is an atheist. The rate has remained constant since the 07/10/1987 – 07/13/1987 Gallup Poll. A more recent survey for The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press (Jun 24-Jul 8, 2003) confirms the previous result: only 46 percent of Americans would vote for an atheist candidate.
[2] The graph is an actualization of that presented in the Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann, 2006.

holding office on account of their religious sentiment. This is however dependent upon one condition, which is that the person seeking public office "acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being". Four other states have a similar requirement in their constitution (Massachusetts, Maryland, North Carolina, and Pennsylvania).

One striking feature when these two facts are put side by side is the eminently political dimension of atheism. Belief in God is not only a matter of personal choice. In the United States, it is part of the necessary civic equipment that a person must have in order to be a good citizen – or to be considered as such. These two indicators clearly state who is worthy of political trust, and who is not.

This paper seeks to explore the reason why one group – atheists – have remained excluded from the "circle of the 'We'" (Hollinger 1993), and how atheists constitute an imaginary counterpoint to the good citizen in the United States. Drawing on a one-year ethnographic observation, we analyze the characterizations of the category "atheist" by parishioners and congregants of three churches in Northern California. The liberal context offered by California reinforces the unexpected violence of those characterizations; in liberal California, atheists are described as "sociopaths" or as "socially deviant". We argue that this points to the very powerful impact which religious belief has on political behavior and cultural membership in this state (which is one of the least religious states), and thus in the country as a whole. *Belief in God – rather than membership in an organized religion – is a proxy to determine who belongs to the political community, to the "us", and who is characterized as an enemy.*

The violence of those characterizations and their social meaning in the American context raise several other questions which will guide us in the unfolding of the argument. (1) Why is belief in God – no matter what God – seen as the necessary moral foundation for citizenship? (2) What role does religion play in the drawing of the contour of the imagined American community? (3) What does this tell us about the foundational conception of the American nation?

The argument developed here is that the distrust shown towards people who do not believe in God reveals two major features of the collective imagination of Americans. The first important trait is that belief in God is considered to a large extent as one of the necessary moral skills for citizenship. Another way to formulate this idea is that one cannot be a good citizen without some kind of transcendent inspiration for one's actions. Taking the argument even further, our research suggests that there is a clear perception of atheists as a potential threat to the country. This seems all the more disproportionate when one considers that atheists represent less than 3 % of the population (Gallup Poll, August 20063), and are such a "small, hard to identify, and disorganized category of persons" (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006: 211-212).

[3] Gallup Poll, interviews conducted between 05/08/2006 and 05/11/2006, sample size: 1002. http://institution.gallup.com/documents/question.aspx?question=157009&Advanced=0&SearchConType=1&SearchTypeAll=god [access date September 13, 2007].

DATA AND METHOD

Theoretical insights

The American nation is first and foremost an "imagined community" of believers (Anderson 1983). But believers in what? Alexis de Tocqueville commented about XIXth century America that it is less important to know whether or not all Americans have a genuine faith in their religion than to know that for them, religion is necessary to sustain the institutions of the republic (Tocqueville 1981: 399). It is less important to know whether Americans are genuine believers in their faith, than to know that they fundamentally believe in the role of religion in grounding political trust. Tocqueville illustrates his point by recounting an episode he read in the *New York Spectator* of August 23rd, 1831 where a witness was not allowed to testify in court after he stated that he did not believe in God[4].

In times closer to us, the polarization between believers ("trustworthy") and unbelievers ("lacking moral grounding") took on a renewed dimension with the assimilation of atheist/communist countries to the figure of the Enemy. Being an atheist became synonymous with being un-American and anti-patriotic. Belief in God was not only what held Americans together; it was also the symbolic boundary which distinguished them from the Other.

The notion of "symbolic boundary", which we alluded to in our introduction by borrowing Hollinger's expression of "the circle of the 'We'", deserves close attention. The concept of symbolic boundary can be traced back to the work of Emile Durkheim, and particularly to his last book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1996 [1915]). Durkheim studied the

[4] "The court of common pleas of Chester county (New York) rejected a witness who declared his disbelief in the existence of God. The presiding judge remarked that he had not before been aware that there was a man living who did not believe in the existence of God; that this belief constituted the sanction of all testimony in a court of justice and that he knew of no cause in a Christian country where a witness had been permitted to testify without such a belief" (Tocqueville 1981: 399).

origin of religious belief in what he calls the "most primitive and simple religion". One of the key statements of his work is the established correspondence between religious systems and the way people perceive the world and themselves:

> For a long time it has been known that the first systems of representations with which men have pictured to themselves the world and themselves were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not a cosmology at the same time as it is a speculation upon divine things (Durkheim 1996 [1915]: 21)

Religious representations – established around the binary opposition of the sacred and the profane – constitute the grid through which men perceive the world and themselves. Religious systems are a framework to understand 'divine things', but they are also a principle of "distinction" and perception for the clan itself.

In pointing to the fact that men are both architects *and* recipients of these mental constructions, Durkheim stresses the organizational role played by religious systems. This is contained in the triple equivalence that he established – the clan equals the totem equals the divinity:

> [The totem] expresses and symbolizes two different sorts of things. In the first place, it is the outward and visible form of what we have called the totemic principle or god. But it is also the symbol of the determined society called the clan. It is the flag: it is the sign by which each clan distinguishes itself from the others (236).

Hence, the sharing of a common set of beliefs draws a symbolic boundary around the group; it distinguishes those who are *in* and those who are *out* of the group. The work of contemporary cultural theorists draws on this background to explore further the articulation between collective representations and group membership. Michèle Lamont and Laurent Thévenot defined symbolic boundaries as the correspondence between:

> (1) group boundaries that demarcate the limits of groups –or outsiders from insiders – who share common values or common definitions of the sacred, of stigma, or of exclusion; and (2) cognitive boundaries organizing mental maps on the basis of symbolic distinctions (Lamont and Thévenot 2000: 4)

Drawing on this theoretical framework, the aim of this paper will be to study how belief in God is a crucial element in shaping the boundary that unites the American political community. The symbolic boundary between atheists and believers is both what unites the American people, and what distinguishes them from the Enemy.

Study design

A limitation of this study must be stressed at the onset. The data we gathered came (with one exception) from religious Americans affiliated with religious institutions. We acknowledge that this may be a bias to our results. However, recent polls show that only 18% of Americans never attend church (Gallup Poll, April 2007)[5]. Given that the intellectual gain of asking atheists what they think of atheists would be minimal, we must keep in mind that we are missing the answers from people who believe in God but are unaffiliated with an organized religion. The exception we mentioned is that our sample contains an atheist who is an active member of our Catholic parish. We will come back to him in the next section of the article.

Valley Church

We call "Valley Church" the large conservative, predominantly White church we studied in the wealthy Contra Costa County. The median household income in 1999 for the town where the church is located is very close to $100,000, more than twice the US average for the same year[6]. The church is adjacent to the Country Club, and is located in a neat suburban community with opulent private homes. The congregation has its own parking lot, regularly full, populated with four-wheel drives and mini-vans of expensive brand names.

[5] USA TODAY/GALLUP POLL, interviews conducted on April 13-15 2007, sample size: 1007. http://institution.gallup.com/search/results.aspx?SearchTypeAll=go%20to%20church&SearchConType=1&Place=B [access date September 13, 2007].
[6] The US median household income in 1999 is $41,994. US Census. URL: http://factfinder.census.gov [accessed on March 27, 2007].

The church has a large campus with several rooms for children's programs as well as meeting rooms for adults. The building extensions were done recently thanks to the growth in membership of the church. Two services are organized on Sunday mornings, one with traditional hymns and robes for the choir and the clergy. It appeals to the older members of the church; the other service has contemporary music and no robes, and appeals to the younger members of the congregation.

The church organizes several ongoing programs: Men's and Women's Ministries, small groups for members to meet in each other's homes, a Children's preschool and elementary school. There is also a Prayer team gathering a handful of people who meet in a small room at the back of the sanctuary and "lift up" the written prayers collected after the service and group activities.

Clearview Church

This congregation is well-known in Alameda County for its liberal politics. It is predominantly White, and the median household income in 1999 for the town is around $47,000, a little over the US average.

The church is located between a gas station, a modest private house, and a public high school. Congregants use the school's playground as a parking lot to park their Toyota Prius[7]. A pole at the front of the church bears the rainbow flag, and a little flyer taped on the wall in the entrance lobby reads: "JOY [the word is in rainbow colors] We welcome and affirm all people, including people of every race, gender, sexual orientation and place of origin. Join us in celebration and community". The Pastor and the associate Pastor are women and do not wear robes, nor does the choir.

[7] During one of the workshops on "Global concerns", a church member said he had counted 32 of the hybrid car in the congregation, and was himself thinking about buying one.

The church has a preschool, and several committees: Eco-Steward, Drama, Family Life, Global Concern, More Light, and an Art Gang. A small Bible study group meets weekly. Service attendees meet for a "social hour" in a large room after the service, where they can find containers to recycle their batteries and buy "fairly traded" coffee.

The Alameda Parish

The Catholic parish we studied is in the Oakland diocese, with a membership of about 1400 people. The ethnic diversity of the parish is reflective of that of the surrounding community, with about a third of the assembly who are Latinos, and a third Filipinos. In the pews, the envelopes for financial contributions in response to the "Bishop's Appeal" are written both in English and Spanish. There are five masses on Sundays, and a variety of programs such as a Catholic Young Adults group, a Bible-study group, and several ministries to reach out to the local community. The Ministry Area Profile, available on the parish's website, indicates that the "likely giving potential in the area" is "somewhat high", and that almost 80% of the community agree with the statement "The role of Churches / Synagogues is to help form and support moral values".

FINDINGS

There is very little scholarship devoted to atheists, one possible explanation of this being that they represent such a small portion of the United States population (2.8% of the population is convinced that God does not exist, Gallup Poll, August 2006[8]). However, one important article questions the intensity of the reaction to atheists in relation to their minority status

[8] Gallup Poll, interviews conducted between 05/08/2006 and 05/11/2006, sample size: 1002. http://institution.gallup.com/documents/question.aspx?question=157009&Advanced=0&SearchConType=1&SearchTypeAll=god [access date September 13, 2007].

(Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006). We agree with the authors that this discrepancy between the actual threat that atheists pose to mainstream America, and the vivacity of the reactions against them is revealing not so much about atheists themselves, but about the "collective identity" of Americans (2006: 212). Using statistical analysis of data collected through a telephone survey and some interviews, the authors reach the conclusion that "atheists" are constructed as "Other". Our qualitative approach confirms this finding, and we want to present here how the construction of otherness operates. The range of arguments that was expressed through the interviews displays different degrees of otherness, different levels of thickness of the symbolic boundary excluding atheists.

Atheists don't believe in God, I don't believe in atheists

The first level in the construction of otherness expressed in the interviews was the difficulty of interviewees to acknowledge the sheer existence of atheists, to acknowledge that a person could actually be an atheist. The music director of Valley Church genuinely stated "I don't believe in them". He then recounted a conversation he had had with an atheist friend, and proceeded to recount his own reaction when his friend told him that he didn't believe in God:

> I don't believe you; I don't believe that you believe that. Look at the reverence that you have for life and for your wife and for your kids and for people around you [this is a very kind person], your life system screams grace and mercy and kindness and gentleness.

For Mike, a person who has reverence for his own life and for the people who are in it cannot be an atheist. His friend's claim is contradicted by facts, and hence the claim to be an atheist is rejected as not holding as true.

A similar incredulity is found in several other interviews where people recount having conversations with friends of them who claim they are atheists, and where that claim is rejected as if the category of "friend" and "atheist" were mutually exclusive. Mario, a

member of the Catholic parish expresses a similar incredulity when asked whether the fact that a candidate declares that he or she does not believe in God would influence his judgment:

> If I'm absolutely honest, yes, I think so. I guess part of it is…it's hard for me to understand that. It's such a foreign thought for me, and what it would be like […] I've never really stopped and think about it…and try to relate to somebody that didn't believe in any religious power…I'd have a hard time…

Mario stresses the fact that not having any kind of religious belief would be "foreign" to him, something hard to comprehend. Paul, a member of the same parish, suggests that the friends he has who claim to be atheists are mistaken in calling themselves "atheists". According to him, they are in fact agnostics who are using the wrong word:

> I think that most people who say that they are atheists are saying that they are a-church […] they say that they are atheists because they have found none of the established religious definitions of God satisfactory. They do not worship any of those definitions. That's why I say that the word that they really should be using is agnostic.

What comes out of these three interviews is the difficulty to mentally accept atheists as a category. The legitimacy of the claim to be an atheist is put into question and even denied or re-labeled. This incredulity is the first degree in the construction of the symbolic boundary between believers and non-believers. The former question the veracity of the latter's claim. The boundary is still "dotted" since what is on the other side is not quite identified, yet.

Atheists are "missing out"

The symbolic boundary between believers and atheists start to emerge when interviewees concede that atheists inspire "pity". This idea was dominant in the more liberal of the Protestant congregation, where atheists are not considered as threats, but rather as people who are "missing out". The drama minister of Clearview explains how she would feel if she learned that a candidate was an atheist: "I just would be sorry, for them, personally, that they haven't made that connection, because I think their life would be more joyful, if they had". Don, from the Catholic parish, displays a more profound sense of pity for a couple he knows, who "have no religion whatsoever". He explains that not only is the couple deprived of

religion, but their son, “a druggy”, died at a young age, and their daughter, who also died, had spent her life “floundering around as far as religion is concerned”, and “had a wedding that was part Christian part Jewish part Hindu. I mean, you know... So, she’s floundering”. Concluding on this atheist couple’s fate, Don includes atheism to their list of hardships:

> So this couple, in their later years, has nothing! And they have nothing to console them, nothing to fall back on, nothing could give them some answers…and they’re not very happy. And I see in them their atheism if you will, their reluctance for God is making them miserable. They could still be unhappy, if they were religious, but they have nothing to fall back on.

In those excerpts, atheists are thought of as people who are deprived of something that could make their life better. They have nothing to provide them with answers to the existential questions of life, and which would provide them with solace. Atheists start to emerge are a distinct category, individuals who lack an essential possession of life.

Atheists are “sociopaths”

The symbolic boundary between believers and atheists is drawn more sharply as the interviews progress. The tone of moral condemnation is already implicit in the summary Don makes of the atheist couple’s life (their son is essentialized in a socially deviant identity – “a druggy”, and their atheism is described as one of the main sources of their “misery”). Later in the interview, when the topic of atheists emerges again as an abstract category, not in relation to the couple he knows, Don explains that atheists are selfish and lack moral values:

> People who do not have a moral or religious background, subscribe to the idea ‘if it feels good, do it’, you know, ‘whatever’, ‘non-judgmental’, ‘whatever you wanna do, fine’. Well that’s fine, except what that does, it makes everybody go off in their own direction, and they don’t care who or what they harm, as long as they can do their thing. An extreme example, is people like pedophiles, ok? Or that sort of thing…they don’t care about anybody else, and who they harm, they just wanna do their own thing. [changing the tone, ironical] Well of course you can’t judge them…yeah they have a problem, but it affects a lot of people!

In this short passage, non-believers are clearly categorized as “selfish” beings, the worst cases of this category being people whose lack of belief makes them so selfish that they abuse

children. Don contrasts the "selfishness" of non-believers to the moral rectitude of believers: "religious people have a certain moral value, shall we say. Principles […] I feel that they are aware of human life, the dignity of human life, and individual worth". The majority of interviewees shared the same mental map which drew a sharp moral line between believers and non-believers. Jodi, a mother of three and member of the more conservative Valley Church, explains why she wouldn't vote for an atheist candidate:

> Because I would just feel like they don't have guidance. And they're going to rely on themselves for all these huge important decisions, and they're not going to have God as their guide, and that scares me.
>
> Do you feel that people who believe in God have a better sense of judgment than people who don't?
>
> Yes.
>
> Do you feel that the president…your president really listens to God in his decision making? He's been criticized by some people for doing that…how do you feel about that?
>
> I think it's great. Even though sometimes I don't agree with all his decisions, I love the fact that he is guided by God, and that he is open about that. That's one of the best things about him.

For Jodi, one of the positive qualities of G. W. Bush is that he publicly acknowledges that religious principles inspire his political choices. The lack of such beliefs would make it impossible for her to trust a candidate because for her, he or she would lack moral direction. The logical consequence of this lack of moral guidance is expressed by Paul, whom we quoted earlier when he said that most of the atheists he knew were actually wrongly-labeled agnostics. For him, if atheists exist, they can only be "sociopaths":

> If a person believes that he or she was an accident occurring, then that person should not, has no basis for being a member of the society, a citizen of the country, following rules, should be an absolute, what we would call, a sociopath or a psychopath because if they are an accident, isolated from every other accident, there is no basis for obligation to another, cooperation to another…

Paul poses belief in God as a necessary condition for membership to society, to the country, as a condition for citizenship. At the core of his argumentation is the idea that an atheist lacks the moral grounding to be civically inspired and be accepted as a full member of society. "Psychopath" in Paul's term, or "pedophile" in Don's, atheists are construed as the most

socially deviant persons. Atheists inspire threat, a sense of threat which acquires in several interviews a political dimension. Paul says that claiming to be an atheist is "a political statement". Jeff, an insurance agent and member of Valley Church explains that atheists have an "agenda to push God out of society", and that he would not want to see an atheist elected to a position of power:

> I would feel that if I give people like that power over me, over our country, and over the money that I spend and I spend crap a lot of money for this country in taxes, I really do, I wouldn't want them to have that power if I have a say in it. I don't necessarily want Christians, in power, I'm not saying that I want them to have political authority, but an overt atheist, someone who makes it a point to be an atheist, will likely do everything they can to take away my freedom to worship, and I think even people who are not overt atheists are doing a good enough job of that anyway.

The threat posed by atheists is conceived as a political one. If atheists were to take power, they would push their agenda and threaten *internally* the values which are thought of as holding American society together.

In light of this strong condemnation of atheists, what strategy can they adopt to fit in society? One option available to them is that they can "pass" (Edgell, Gerteis and Hartmann 2006: 230). During the course of our fieldwork, we were introduced to Brad, an atheist who is a very active member of the Alameda parish and who describes himself as a "born-again heathen". He rejects the label "atheist" because he says it is "very long on negativism. Heathens, very positively, believe in three things: nature, science and truth […] the thing that bothers me about atheists is that they are so militant about it". It is interesting to note that the word "atheist" is charged with such negative connotation that even atheists themselves want to find a substitute. Asked about his motivation to go to church, he answered "the community", "the choir" and "the music". He then explains that there are other people like him in the church, and that their way of not arousing suspicion is to do "a don't ask don't tell kind of thing". Brad explains that it is ok for him to be a "heathen" as long as he is discreet

about it. This attitude would probably find grace in the eyes of Jodi, who says in a nutshell what is shared by the vast majority of interviewees:

> I think there's two pieces: there's Christian, and there's believe in God. Because I feel I could feel comfortable with someone of a different faith, who believed in God, like say a Jewish person. But, if they overtly said they didn't believe in God, I would have a problem with that [our emphasis].

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

The series of in-depth interviews conducted with Americans in the course of a one-year field research clearly points to one conclusion. An atheist is not thought of as a person holding a set of beliefs compatible with his or her acceptance in society. The lack of belief in God is a disqualifying factor when membership in the community is concerned. Whether they inspire "pity" (the softer reaction), or are more harshly described as "sociopaths", "pedophiles", or "lacking moral guidance", atheists are characterized as individuals lacking the proper civic equipment to take part in the political community (they are too "selfish", they have no reason to want to pursue good over evil). In most of the interviews, atheists are perceived as a threat, all the more dangerous because of the political claim that they are perceived to be making ("pushing their agenda") and the danger to shared values they represent.

This research tells us less about atheists themselves (what are their social characteristics, their belief system) than it reveals one of the very important bases for commonality in America today. Belief in God – in any God – is a necessary condition for membership in the political community. This must of course be tied to the broader definition of citizenship in the United States today, and suggests that the prevailing conception of the American nation is closer to "orthodox Americanism", which "views America as an exemplary moral community which has been shaped by-and shapes people of a virtuous character" (Sinopoli and Gabrielson 1999: 76), than to a "pluralist" conception of the nation, which sees "the United States not as

a community but as a framework for cooperation depending on a rather thin stratum of agreement regarding principles of political right" (1999: 68).

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