

Atheists' diversity woes have no black-and-white answers

by [G. Jeffrey MacDonald](#)

January 3, 2011

(RNS) Alix Jules is an atheist, but for years he felt uncomfortable at gatherings of nonbelievers. The reason: he's black.

"I got really tired of going back and forth to free thought events and being the only black person there," said Jules, 36, who lives in Dallas. "It was not necessarily inviting. I just felt like an outcast ... No one was reaching out to me."

Last year, Jules helped launch a local initiative to address what atheists regard as an international problem for their movement: a lack of racial and gender diversity.

From the smallest local meetings to the largest conferences, the vast majority of speakers and attendees are almost always white men. Leading figures of the atheist movement -- Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett -- are all white men.

But making atheism more diverse is proving to be no easy task.

Surveys suggest most atheists are white men. A recent survey of 4,000 members of the Freedom from Religion Foundation found that 95 percent were white, and men comprised a majority.

Among U.S. nonbelievers, 72 percent are white and 60 percent are men, according to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey; the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life found that Hispanics make up 11 percent, and African-Americans just 8 percent, of "unaffiliated" Americans.

"Anytime you go to an atheist meeting, it tends to be predominantly male and white. We know that," said Blair Scott, national affiliate director for American Atheists, which has 131 affiliate groups. "We go out of our way to encourage participation by females and minorities. The problem is getting those people out (of the closet as atheists) in the first place."

Atheists are working to put a more diverse public face on their movement. A new group, Black Atheists of America, drew about 25 attendees at its first national meeting in October. Also last year, the Institute for Humanist Studies was born in Washington, D.C. with a goal of helping atheism become more diverse.

But diversity remains elusive. As of late December, American Atheist magazine hadn't been able to find enough black atheist writers to fill a special Black History Month edition for February.

In another telling sign, the Council for Secular Humanism tried in vain to present a diverse array of speakers at its four-day October conference in Los Angeles. Most of the 300 attendees were white men, as were 23 of the 26 speakers.

"Considering the changing demographics of our country, we need to consider why our message is not resonating with Latinos, why it's not resonating with people of color, and why it's not resonating with women in the way that it could be," said Debbie Goddard, director of

African-Americans for Humanism.

One theory says minorities tend to be more reluctant than whites to "come out of the closet" as non-believers, in part because religion and culture tend to be deeply intertwined in minority communities, according to Anthony Pinn, a black humanist and professor of religious studies at Rice University.

"Within African-American communities, the question concerning black atheists is: have they surrendered their allegiance to the principles and ideas that helped us survive?" said Pinn, who is also research director for the Institute for Humanist Studies.

The concern is that "the African-American atheists have surrendered some of what it means to be black and a survivor in the United States. They've lost touch with their tradition," Pinn said.

Making atheism more diverse is important on various levels, according to atheist organizers. For starters, Scott said gatherings are enriched when atheists have varied backgrounds and experiences to share.

"We need to be more vocal, in the atheist community at large and in our (black) community, to let others feel more comfortable in coming out," said Ayanna Watson, a New York City lawyer and founder of Black Atheists of America.

She and Pinn hope more blacks will feel more comfortable "coming out" as atheists when they learn about black atheism's roots in American history, through such figures as Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, W.E.B. DuBois and Frederick Douglass.

Efforts to cultivate diversity in atheism seem to be gaining some traction among African-Americans, Goddard said, but not as much among Asians or Latinos. "I've seen no real success in outreach, no efforts really being made to the Latino community," Goddard said.

There's also sharp debate inside atheist circles about whether to create separate minority groups. Goddard and others believe such niche groups perform a helpful service by helping minorities embrace their nonbelief, but others say ethnicity-based gatherings betray the movement's commitment to transcending racial and ethnic boundaries.

"Some argue (that) organizing any kind of group for a specific demographic ... is inherently racist, is inherently sexist," Goddard said, "and is not something that our groups should organize or promote." The white male profile of most atheist gatherings is not likely to change anytime soon, observers concede, especially if atheist minorities find their own community in specially designed separate groups.

Nevertheless, some activists like Jules are holding to a vision of integration. He chairs a newly formed diversity council for the Dallas Coalition for Reason, which includes the area's 15 atheist groups.

Last year, the coalition started targeted outreach campaigns to minority groups, assuring local black gays and lesbians, for example, that atheist groups will accept them non-judgmentally.

Dallas' Fellowship of Free Thought used to be almost exclusively white, Jules said, but now the group counts members with black, Hispanic and Middle Eastern backgrounds, including former Muslims.

"People think (atheism) is reserved for white academia," Jules said,

"but it's not."