

Atheists distrusted as much as rapists

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(RNS) A new study finds that atheists are among society's most distrusted group, comparable even to rapists in certain circumstances.

Psychologists at the University of British Columbia and the University of Oregon say that their study demonstrates that anti-atheist prejudice stems from moral distrust, not dislike, of nonbelievers.

"It's pretty remarkable," said Azim Shariff, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of Oregon and a co-author of the study, which appears in the current issue of *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

The study, conducted among 350 Americans adults and 420 Canadian college students, asked participants to decide if a fictional driver damaged a parked car and left the scene, then found a wallet and took the money, was the driver more likely to be a teacher, an atheist teacher, or a rapist teacher?

The participants, who were from religious and nonreligious backgrounds, most often chose the atheist teacher.

The study is part of an attempt to understand what needs religion fulfills in people. Among the conclusions is a sense of trust in others.

"People find atheists very suspect," Shariff said. "They don't fear God so we should distrust them; they do not have the same moral obligations of others. This is a common refrain against atheists. People fear them as a group."

Shariff, who studies atheism and religion, said the findings provide a clue to combating anti-atheism prejudice.

"If you manage to offer credible counteroffers of these stereotypes, this can do a lot to undermine people's existing prejudice," he said. "If you realize there are all these atheists you've been interacting with all your life and they haven't raped your children that is going to do a lot to dispel these stereotypes."