

# The Village Atheist Syndrome

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In psychiatric terms, some humanists suffer from a dysphoria, a dysphoria which we have named the "Village Atheist Syndrome." The term village atheist is not a new one and has often been used in the past in both fictional and non-fictional works to describe the non-believer who manages to proclaim his atheism in small communities made up of devoted and unquestioning believers. Our use of the term, however, is much broader than this in order to describe a type of humanist or free thinker.

In outward appearances the persons afflicted with the syndrome appear to be no different than anyone else. Most tend to hold respectable positions in society, have the normative family affiliations, and do most of the things that other people of their age or economic condition do. Some of our more sociobiologically oriented colleagues with whom we have discussed the behavior feel that there might well be genetic or be a result of other biological forces but if this is the case, no one to our knowledge has isolated them.

A few psychologists have suggested that the village atheist syndrome could be classed as a form of obsessive compulsive behavior. So far, however, no one has been able to test serotonin levels of any of those we would class as having the syndrome. We ourselves feel that multiple factors are involved and since we are primarily social scientists we tend to look for social and cultural factors. We must admit, however, that we have arrived at such conclusions through participant observer studies rather than any rigorous testing.

## Appearance

We first became interested in the syndrome from our mutual experience on boards and committee meetings of humanist and

free thought organizations. Once our interest was aroused we noted that sometimes in such settings, the individual becomes so dominating, we might even say irrational, that the proceedings are totally disrupted. We also have noted that certain words, for example "God" or "religion," seem to set them off, sometimes the reaction is so severe that it seems to be an apoplectic attack. If we were to follow the psychiatric model mentioned at the beginning of this paper, this apoplectic reaction could be called a sort of third stage syndrome, and could be labeled the paranoid village atheist syndrome. We have noted also that the symptoms seem to become more severe with age, although when the person reaches 80 or so there is a gradual decline in the response pattern.

### **Early Symptoms and Progressive Stages**

Perhaps the most obvious symptom is an inability to compromise, to get along with others. This is first noticed in board meetings of humanist and free thought groups where the village atheist is attempting to get his/her way. We should state that though the condition most frequently appears in males, when females present with it they seem to get a more severe case. Obviously if it has any genetic source, it must be carried on one portion of an x chromosome and is a recessive trait in females where it can be overshadowed by the genetic inheritance on the paired x chromosome unless it too carries it. It, however, would be dominant in males because it is not carried on the y chromosome. Whether this explanation has any validity is certainly unproven, and we offer it not as a hypothesis but only as an interesting possibility which might explain why women with the syndrome suffer such severe dysphoria.

Since we first observed the symptoms, we have come to believe that for those with a tendency towards the behavior can be most easily diagnosed at board or other meetings of humanist and free thought groups. Apparently when the individuals with a proclivity for the syndrome find themselves among what they had believed to be like-minded free thinkers, they are both shocked and

appalled to find that others disagree with them, often on major issues. This disagreement is marked by what can be only called anti-social behavior, a clear mark of the village atheist syndrome. In order to get their way they nit-pick everything to death, and if outvoted at one meeting will come back at the next and start over again. We should add that the condition is not only common in humanist and free thought groups, but a similar phenomenon exists in many Unitarian-Universalist congregations. Obviously the Unitarian-Universalist example represents a closely-related syndrome, although the initiating cause is different, and thus it has to be distinguished from the village atheist syndrome. The existence of a similar behavior in the two syndromes, however, would give some further evidence to the possible genetic influence on the behavior.

In fact, distinguishing the village atheist syndrome from the similar syndrome in Unitarianism-Universalism, and perhaps elsewhere, is the almost total intolerance of "religious" belief by those so afflicted. This hostility to religion is often accompanied by a feeling of superiority in their ability to function without religion. Sometimes this superiority is outright arrogance, an arrogance which only the possessor of the truth can have. Sometimes the arrogance seems to be accompanied by insecurity because they seem to almost lose control of their reason if a fellow humanist or free thinker does not view religion in the same way that they do. In severe cases they seem almost to foam at the mouth, their voices rise, and their whole body shakes. Related to this is their basic intolerance of religious professionals, whether ministers, priests, rabbis, imams, or in the more severely afflicted, ethical culture leaders and humanist counselors.

### **Pathogenesis**

In talking with individuals whom we believe have strong symptoms of the syndrome, and making notes of our conversation, we believe that there are many similarities in their backgrounds. Often in the communities in which they live, they are the only pro-

fessed free thinker. Many have gained a reputation for their free thinking, and while the locals cannot understand how they believe as they do, their place in the community as a dissident is recognized. They are often the lone voice, and while few ever bother to listen to them, they are tolerated, and often the stands they take are adopted by others. The village atheist in such a situation often feels isolated from others and is suspicious of them. Some would call this a paranoia but it probably is a true assessment of their condition. As humanists and free thinkers, we tend to admire the person who is willing to stand up and be counted, to fight the good fight regardless of consequences. Moreover, often the village atheist when he finds a sympathetic ear is a surprisingly friendly and supportive person. At least for the short time.

When such a person finally meets and joins with a group of like-minded free thinkers, he is not at all sure how to act. At last, he or she thinks believes to have found like-minded individuals. The difficulty comes when the individual finds disagreement with his viewpoint (on almost any kind of issue) among his or her fellow free thinkers. Once you have disagreed, let alone opposed such a person on an issue, even if you think it was a minor disagreement, it is almost impossible for him or her to trust you again. You, in short, are not different from those people they have been struggling against all their lives. In a group of non-conformists, and this is what humanists and free thinkers are, the village atheists are denied the position of non-conformist they held in their own communities, and so have to resort to ever more outrageous behavior to achieve it.

The person afflicted with the syndrome also spends considerable time hunting up obscure facts, feeling that nothing should be overlooked to buttress his or her case. In the process village atheists often loses themselves in detail, ignoring the larger picture. This behavior is obviously self-destructive. Unfortunately, it is not only self-destructive to the individual but to free thought groups themselves.

There are other factors also involved. We have found that a significant percentage of those with the village atheist syndrome were born into religiously orthodox religious traditions. Usually they themselves were very religious, until in their teens or in their twenties, they began questioning the tradition they grew up in and had accepted. As they did so, they found more and more errors and superstitions in it, and in the process became real experts on various systems of belief. This kind of background, however, is common to many in the free thought movement and by itself is not enough to give rise to the syndrome. Rejecting religion, however, was usually not an easy thing for the village atheist since it meant breaking with their family and loved ones. In many cases the trauma is so severe that the break with the family remains irreparable. Since they are so conscious of what their own commitment to free thought has cost them, they find it difficult to accept those who arrived at a free thought pattern more casually, or at least without the trauma they feel they suffered.

The most severe cases occur among those who either had not yet broken with their past when they married and their mate refused to join them in their thinking, or who entered into a marriage with a belief that they could change the thinking of their loved one. It seems that not infrequently the new convert to free thought is like any other convert, convinced that they have the truth and want others to have it. Many naively believed that once they presented the truth to their loved ones, they too would believe as they did. When this did not occur, hard choices had to be made and often peace was kept by not talking about such things at home. It seems quite plausible that forced to keep quiet at home about such issues, they often became embittered about religion, taking out on religion and the religious the antagonisms they feel to their own spouse. The situation is even worse if children are involved and the free thinking individual is unable to communicate his or her own ideas effectively to them.

Put into simple terms, the village atheist who has arrived at such a position through great turmoil, continues to have to face this

turmoil at home every day of his or her life. Many grow increasingly bitter. Even when the spouse or other partner subscribes to the free thought concepts of their mate it is often not with the same intensity, and is more willing to outwardly conform to what in many communities amounts to public religious ceremonies. Everything from rotary clubs to boy scouts seem somehow to reek with religion, and those who have arrived at their free thinking through difficult and emotionally wrenching conditions, become ever more antagonistic. They are non-conformers in a conformist world, and to survive compromise is perhaps necessary. This is difficult for the village atheists to do, since if they had wanted to compromise, they would not have broken with traditional religion. They might well compromise in their communities, holding their tongue, and giving nominal lip service to community customs, but when in free thought groups, they expect more from their fellow non-believers. To find that it is even necessary to compromise as a free thinker because other free thinkers do not agree with them is simply overwhelming to them. This is particularly true among the more isolated free thinkers.

The situation is eased somewhat in some of the larger cities where they can perhaps find like-minded people, but even there, many of them feel they have suffered so much for the cause, that they and only they really know what free thought is. They have the zealotry of Jehovah's Witnesses but without the organization, and they cannot look to judgment day for vindication but have to deal with the world as it is. Inevitably, much of their hostility is directed at their fellow free thinkers, particularly those who claim that humanism is a religion. Religion is what they had left and they regard those who claim to be religious humanists somewhat the same way that pentecostal-evangelist regards main-line Protestantism or the Catholic Church. They believe religion is religion and humanism is humanism, that the two are radically different, and no compromise should be tolerated.

## **Implications and Possible Treatment of the Condition**

Almost all of us know the results of the syndrome, the splintering of groups into smaller and smaller groups of like-minded believers. The problem of dealing with the stand alone iconoclast who is willing to tear the building down to keep his or her own integrity was often described by Ayn Rand. She looked upon such an individual as heroic, but this kind of heroics does not build movements.

Unfortunately there is no easy cure for what we can abbreviate as the VAS. Therapy has not helped and antibiotics do not touch it. This means that with the current knowledge we have to use subjective approaches, treat the symptoms and not necessarily try to effect any radical change. Probably the first step in dealing with the condition is to recognize it. We do not think that it needs to be entered into the DSM IV (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of the American Psychiatric Association) to be recognized, but we need to alert ourselves about the condition and the danger that it poses to our movement, not so much because of the destructiveness of the village atheist but because all of us are carriers of some of the elements that go into the syndrome. We think that perhaps a necessary second step is to recognize the emotional trauma that many of us had to go through to become humanists and free thinkers. We might give more publicity to this, more case studies, but the important thing in recognizing this is to realize that not everyone is willing to undergo such a process. Most people, in fact, seem to be content to drift, to retain old contacts, and to gradually change their beliefs without making any sudden or dramatic break. They keep the vocabulary of the believer but have in effect become non-believers. This is demonstrated by the decline in religious commitment all across the spectrum and the willingness of larger and larger number of churches to emphasize fellowship and good feeling rather than doctrine.

This implies that it might be easier in the future for many to break away from traditional religion, and not suffer the kind of trauma that so many afflicted with the Village Atheist syndrome did. But this is future talk, and as long as we remain a small minority, we need to have the very elements that exist in the village atheist to survive. But we also need to learn to cooperate with each other. We need to emphasize the diversity of the humanist camp. There is room for all kinds of organizations with slightly different approaches and backgrounds, but we need to have organizations which hold us together to work for common good, perhaps like the International Humanist and Ethical Union or the North American Committee for Humanism has its varieties but we also need to keep a core belief whether we are religious or secular which emphasizes the core of humanism, that humans are the key to their own future and the problems we create have to be solved by us.

But we also need to curtail some of the isolation under which many humanists live. The Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism pioneered the traveling seminars which have made it possible for those who live far away from a humanist or free thought group to meet and discuss important topics with others even if there is no easily accessible local group and they cannot go to a costly annual meeting. The American Humanist Association has followed suit. The various humanist and atheist communities of Los Angeles have organized an annual get together where they can socialize and exchange ideas. This also is a step in the right direction and other regional groupings have appeared. One of the authors of this paper has urged humanists to form centers, similar to the Jewish Community Centers, where free thinkers can get together for more social occasions and for joint programs occasionally. We need to begin joint educational programs among all the groups for the young since growing up in a free thinking family often tends to isolate the young from community activities. We need humanist coffee houses, humanist book stores, and humanist social events. Obviously we cannot do any of these things alone, and this means that we have to cooperate with like-minded people, even



some of those who classify themselves as religious and who join churches to get some of the same feeling of fellowship which is so missing in many humanist groups. We need humanist dating services, humanist homes for senior citizens, and we need to put a humanist imprint on dealing with the world's problems. Since we are both secularists, we feel we can best do this by joining existing secular organizations rather than always trying to organize special humanist groups, but even in such groups we need to somehow have a humanist imprint. Others might get more satisfaction from specifically labeled humanist groups. Every humanist has to make his or her own decision. Certainly we served the cause of humanism in our lecture tour in Ghana and it was kind of nice to be labeled, and help our fellow humanists gain more publicity. Lastly, when we see the emerging village atheist syndrome, we need to recognize it in ourselves and in others, and offer each other the kind of support that will help us on the way to recovery. We want and need most of the characteristics which go into the village atheist syndrome, but we need to curtail the destructiveness that results from those who have the most severe dysphoria. We need to do so if humanism is to survive through the twenty-first century.