

Two Shocking Attacks on Atheism by Religious Bigots

and how *American Atheists* fought back and won

Greta Christina

If there are just two things you take away from this story they should be:

- Anti-atheist bigotry and discrimination, of a completely overt, very ugly kind, is real.
- Atheists are no longer putting up with it. If you f*k with them, they will f*k with you right back. And they know how to do it.

Two recent events in the news illustrate this bigotry vividly. In the first, a billboard company in Ohio rejected an atheist billboard campaign – at the last minute, the day before the billboards were scheduled to go up, after weeks of extensive discussion and planning with no hint of trouble – because the atheist content was deemed “obscene, unnecessarily offensive and/or not in the best interests of the community at large.”

In the second story, a local merchant near an atheist conference put a sign on his shop door, explicitly saying that conference attendees were not welcome in his Christian business. And he got a faceful of Internet fury for his trouble.

Don't Believe In God? Don't Try to Advertise

Let's talk about the billboards first. The Mid Ohio Atheists (MOA) – a largely humanist organization that makes regular donations to the local homeless shelter and battered women's shelter, does an “adopt a highway” litter pickup,

plants flowers in community parks, and is currently doing a holiday food and blanket drive – had been planning a billboard campaign with the LIND Media Company, scheduled to go up during the holiday season. One was going to say simply, “Don't believe in God? Neither do we.” One was going to read, “There is no God. Don't believe everything you hear.” (A reference to a recent Christian billboard in the area that, amusingly, sported the exact same text.) And the third was going to read, “1.6 million Ohioans know myths when they see them. Do you? American Atheists since 1963.” (With pictures of Poseidon, Jesus, Santa, and Satan.)

This billboard campaign had been planned for weeks. According to Michael Adams, spokesman for Mid Ohio Atheists, “We spent several weeks exchanging emails, planning locations, and reviewing the graphics for the billboards. In late October everything was ready to go. They had the final graphic, had done the mock-ups and we had approved them. Everything seemed to be going off without a hitch and I was extremely pleased with the company.”

But then, out of nowhere, just a few days before the billboards were scheduled to go up, LIND abruptly changed gears. Vice-president Maura S. Siegenthaler sent a terse letter to Mid Ohio Atheists president Ron Stephens, saying simply, “Per the terms of our agreement, we are unable to fulfill your billboard contract. I apolo-



Photo by Reddit user juju2112

gize for the inconvenience, but we are canceling the contract and you will not receive any invoices from LIND Outdoor.”

MOA was understandably upset: funds had been raised and the campaign had been widely publicized in the community, and it had been scheduled for the busy holiday season. Stephens asked for an explanation – and Siegenthaler sent an email saying:

The inflammatory nature of the proposed displays would no doubt be considered offensive to much of the community and would be harmful to Lind’s community reputation and goodwill. Lind has always and will continue to reserve the right not to publish advertise-

ments which, in its sole opinion, are obscene, unnecessarily offensive and/or not in the best interests of the community at large.

The inflammatory nature. Obscene, unnecessarily offensive, and/or not in the best interests of the community at large.

“Don’t believe in God? Neither do we.”

Please note that LIND has accepted religious billboards saying, “Saturday the TRUE Lord’s Day. Antichrist changed it, avoid his mark.” They have accepted religious billboards saying, “It’s all about Him (Jesus) ... and He is all about you.” But “Don’t believe in God? Neither do we” – that was considered inflammatory, obscene, unnecessarily offensive, and/or not in the best interests of the community at large. To the point where the company rejected a billboard campaign that had been planned and discussed with the company for weeks – and did so at the last minute, when it was far too late for the MOA to make other plans with another company.

Explicitly because the billboards were about atheism.

If you had any doubts whatsoever about the reality of anti-atheist bigotry? If you’ve read about atheists being denied custody of their children explicitly on the basis of their atheism; atheist kids in public high schools trying to organize clubs and routinely getting stonewalled; atheist veterans getting booed in a Memorial Day parade; atheist teenagers getting threats of brutal violence and death for asking their school to obey the law and not proselytize about religion to students; polls consistently putting atheists at the bottom of lists of who people would vote for or trust; towns getting hysterical about atheists playing “Jingle Bells” in a Christmas parade ... and you still weren’t convinced that anti-atheist bigotry is real? This story should put your doubts to rest.

So what are atheists doing about it?

Raising a ruckus. Atheists have been calling, writing, emailing, blogging, Facebooking, Tweeting, and more, letting LIND know that their anti-atheist bigotry is not acceptable. (If you agree and want to let LIND know about it, call them at (800) 444-LIND; call LIND vice-

president Maura Siegenthaler at (419) 571-4286 [cell]; email Siegenthaler at mss@lindoutdoor.com; fax LIND at (419) 522-1323; or write them at 409-411 North Main Street, Mansfield, OH 44902.)

In the last few years atheists have become seriously organized, mobilized, visible, vocal, activist ... and, very importantly, unapologetic about their atheism. Atheists have become increasingly conscious of their status as second-class citizens – and increasingly unwilling to just lie down and accept it. Atheists are mad as hell ... and they're not going to take it anymore.

Which brings us to Gelatogate.

I Scream, You Scream, We All Scream, for Justice

Just a couple of weeks ago – the weekend before Thanksgiving, in fact – the annual Skepticon conference was held in Springfield, MO. Skepticon is one of the largest gatherings of atheists and skeptics in the country, with more than 1,000 attendees this year, and many local businesses in Springfield took advantage of the gathering, listing themselves in a discount coupon booklet for conference attendees. Including Andy Drennan, owner of the ice cream shop Gelato Mio. But then Drennan decided to visit the free conference he was advertising. He saw a presentation that he took offense at: Brother Sam Singleton, Atheist Evangelist, doing a satirical send-up of a Pentecostal revival meeting.

And he put a sign on the door to his shop, reading, quote, “Skepticon is NOT Welcomed To My Christian Business.”

Now. Disregard, for a moment, the fact that nobody pressed this atheist revival meeting on Drennan. Disregard the fact that the satire of religion Drennan found so offensive was an

atheist event, in atheist space, and that being shocked and upset by it was the equivalent of an atheist going to a Pentecostal church service and being shocked and upset by all the talk about hellfire and damnation. Disregard the question of whether it was reasonable for Drennan to be offended ... or whether people have just as much right to publicly criticize and mock religion as they do with any other idea.

And focus simply on this: The man put a sign on the door of his business, explicitly saying that he would not do business with attendees of an atheist conference.

That's not just bigoted. That's almost certainly illegal.

Imagine if he had put a sign in his door saying, “Jewish Federations of North America is NOT Welcomed To My Christian Business.” Imagine if the sign had read, “Living Buddhist Conference is NOT Welcomed To My Christian Business.” “Catholic Family Conference is NOT Welcomed

To My Christian Business.” “Muslim Congress is NOT Welcomed To My Christian Business.” Would there be any question at all that this was an attempt by a public place of business to discriminate on the basis of religious affiliation?

So what happened?

Atheists brought the nuclear smackdown.

Someone took a photo of the sign, and within minutes it was Facebooked, Tweeted, G-plussed, texted, blogged, emailed, and probably sent by smoke signals and carrier pigeon. It raced through the atheosphere like a wildfire on meth. Gelato Mio was inundated with angry calls and emails; their ratings on Yelp and UrbanSpoon sank to the basement; on UrbanSpoon, their “most popular menu item” was quickly voted as “Bigotry.”

And Drennan apologized.

Boy, did he ever. He took the sign down. He apologized on his Web site. He apologized again,

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on Facebook. He apologized yet again, on Reddit Atheism, profusely. He said he was completely wrong and that his actions were inexcusable. He said he'd happily welcome atheists and Skepticon attendees into his store, and offered them a ten percent discount.

There's been much discussion in the atheosphere about whether atheists should accept Drennan's apology or not. Whether his apology was sincere or self-interested, and whether it matters. Whether he understands the principle that atheists have a right to make fun of religion at their own conferences – conferences which religious believers are free to attend or not, as they choose. Whether he had a right to be offended or not. Whether he understands the principle that there are appropriate ways to express offense – and that banning people from a public business based on their religious affiliation is most emphatically not one of them. Whether atheists should mend fences and patronize his business in the future, or continue to boycott it. But one thing is crystal clear:

Atheists will not be f*cked with.

Gelatogate is far from the only example of this. Remember the American Cancer Society story? Remember how the American Cancer Society rejected participation by a non-theistic organization in their Relay for Life ... along with the massive donation that would have come with it? And remember how the story went viral? Remember how the ACS was inundated for weeks with emails and phone calls and letters from furious members and supporters – atheists and others – demanding an explanation, angrily withdrawing any future donations, or both? Remember how, for weeks, the ACS's Facebook wall was filled with almost nothing but angry comments about the story? Remember their shoddy attempts to cover their tracks and erase or distort the online trail of evidence? Remember

how they issued press release after press release after press release, in increasingly hysterical attempts at damage control?

Remember that.

Atheists now have a community, and a movement. Both of which are growing by leaps and bounds. They are organized – especially with social networking and the Internet. They can be mobilized in a heartbeat. They can make themselves seen, and heard ... and are getting better at it every day. They are increasingly unashamed of

their atheism, and increasingly unwilling to accept any attempts by others to shame them. And when roused to action, they are a force to be reckoned with.

They can and do devote these powers to less confrontational goals: fundraising for worthy causes, support for community members in need. But they are no longer accepting bigotry against

them as the way of the world. They are fighting back. They know how to do it. And they're getting stronger, and smarter, and better.

F*k with them at your own risk.

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Greta Christina has been writing professionally since 1989, on topics including atheism, sexuality and sex-positivity, LGBT issues, politics, culture, and whatever crosses her mind. She is on the speakers' bureaus of the Secular Student Alliance and the Center for Inquiry. She is editor of the Best Erotic Comics anthology series, and of Paying For It: A Guide by Sex Workers for Their Clients. Her writing has appeared in multiple magazines and newspapers, including Ms., Penthouse, Chicago Sun-Times, On Our Backs, and Skeptical Inquirer, and numerous anthologies, including Everything You Know About God Is Wrong and three volumes of Best American Erotica. She lives in San Francisco with her wife, Ingrid. You can email her at greta@gretachristina.com, and follow her on Twitter at @GretaChristina.

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