

No black and white answers to lack of diversity among atheists

February 24, 2011

DALLAS (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."



African-Americans gather in Washington for the first African Americans for Humanism conference. The percentage of black atheists, agnostics and secularists nearly doubled, from 6 percent to 11 percent, between 1990 and 2008. But among nonbelievers within the United States, 72 percent are white, and 60 percent are men, according to the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey. (RNS FILE PHOTO/Chika Oduah)

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—all are white men.

Surveys suggest most atheists are white men. A recent survey of 4,000 members of the [Freedom from Religion Foundation](#) found 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 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.”

A new group, [Black Atheists of America](#), drew only about two-dozen 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.

Some observers assert minorities tend to be more reluctant than whites to “come out of the closet” as nonbelievers 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?” Pinn said.