



Godless and proud

A new U of A club is challenging religious groups on campus by preaching the word of atheism

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Engineering student and avowed freethinker Ian Bushfield is still amazed at how quickly his brand-spanking-new University of Alberta Atheists and Agnostic club took off, and how much of an impact the neophyte group is having on the campus' established religious community.

Officially founded last summer when Bushfield and some of his god-optional friends grew frustrated with the "overbearing" religious groups on campus, the Atheists and Agnostic group took off like wildfire as soon as it was officially unveiled at the September 2007 Club Fair held at the U of A Butterdome.

"We collected over 300 signatures (from students interested in membership and/or looking for more information about the club), which was one of the highest number of the clubs that participated," says Bushfield, the founding club president.



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Marion Kilgour chats with fellow U of A Atheist club member Sonia Milbradt as David Miles (on left) looks on following a meeting of the U of A Chaplains and the Atheist club at Remedy Cafe.

Walter Tychnowicz/Edmonton Journal

"We now have probably about 130 members, and have 10 to 12 people show up to our regular meetings." Not bad, given that Bushfield, 22, says he wouldn't likely have formed the club at all if there had been "no other religious clubs on campus."

By comparison, at a recent event hosted by the U of A Chaplains, Lutheran Chaplain Richard Reimer remarked that he was "really bummed" during the club fair when he dropped by the atheists' booth and discovered that they had already collected 75 names when the Lutherans had managed to collect four.

"Basically, this club is a way to unite non-religious people together and give them a voice and a social group that can be used to do a bit of activism," Bushfield says.

So far, club-sponsored activities have included screening a documentary about renowned atheist/scientist/author Richard Dawkins (60 people attended), joining in (in a good-natured, oppositional fashion) public discussions about religion, and waving the secular flag during the recent provincial election campaign.

This commitment to reason-based and secular society is a big point for Bushfield and his fellow club members.

"I remember being in elementary school when the Gideons came and gave out Bibles, and thinking to myself that this was stupid, and I didn't want one," Bushfield says.

Unlike earlier generations of atheists who had to work hard to shuck a religious upbringing and the constraints of a universally religious society, Bushfield was raised in a diehard irreligious household, and has been inside a church only five times in his life.

Bushfield and his U of A band of non-believers are hardly unique. In fact, it could seem like the group is riding a wave of popular atheism. For example, not only is Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* still ranked number 47 on the Amazon.ca bestsellers list

months after its release (at the time of writing), some 20 new atheist groups have been founded on different Canadian campuses over the past year.

"You're seeing the same thing all across the U.S. as well," he says. "This is the first generation raised in a secular society that doesn't feel awkward if it doesn't go to church."

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