

9

The New Moral Entrepreneurs Atheist Activism as Scripted and Performed Political Deviance

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Social media have become an arena for religious discussion, debate and downright vitriol (see Lovheim, 2007; Borer and Schafer, 2011). Anonymous comments can be made and left for others to find without the demands or accountability of face-to-face interaction. Imagine, for a moment, stumbling upon a Facebook page or Twitter feed filled with hateful and threatening comments such as “I’m gonna drop an anchor on your face!” or “#thatbitchisgoingtohell, and Satan is gonna rape her!!!”¹ How might a person react if those comments were written about a complete stranger? About one’s friend? About one’s family? Mark Ahlquist, a firefighter and engaged community member in Cranston, Rhode Island, did not have to imagine how he might react. These comments, and a slew of other equally damning ones, were directed at his teenage daughter, Jessica.

Jessica was a student at Cranston High School where a Christian prayer banner has hung in the west auditorium since 1963. In July 2010, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) contacted the Cranston School District asking for the banner’s removal, citing the display as a violation of the Establishment Clause Amendment I in the Constitution which states: “Government shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, prohibiting Congress from favoring one religion over another”.

¹ These are just two comments that were posted on Twitter and Facebook by classmates in response to Jessica Ahlquist’s request to have a prayer banner removed from her high school. The full list can be found on the Blag Hag blog: <http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag/2012/01/that-christian-compassion/>.

The school board denied this request and in April 2011, the ACLU filed a lawsuit against the Cranston School District in Rhode Island on behalf of the Ahlquist family (Schiedrop, 2012).

In January 2012, the US District Court for the District of Rhode Island made their ruling on 840 F. Supp. 2d 507 – Dist. Court, D. Rhode Island [2012], *Ahlquist v. Cranston* in favor of Mark Ahlquist. The school district removed the banner a few months later and agreed to pay the ACLU's \$150,000 legal fees. Although the school district decided not to appeal the rule, town residents were outraged. Sixteen-year-old Jessica and her family became the focal point of that outrage. They were harassed by students, community members and even elected state officials. The day after the initial ruling was made, Representative Peter Polombo (R) publically called Jessica an "evil little thing" on local talk radio. Others publically denounced her, calling her names such as "witch" and "little snot" (Schiedrop, 2012). The Ahlquist's family home was vandalized and Jessica was repeatedly threatened with bodily harm, often needing a police escort to and from school. She was perceived and typified as a walking personification of evil and remains a prominent target for cyberbullying, continually vilified on the Internet. Much of the contempt stemmed not only from her actions against the overt religious symbolism in her public high school, it was also due to a label she had given herself: "atheist".

Jessica's story is not unique. Eighteen-year-old Max Nielsen is another atheist student who publically fought the unconstitutional inclusion of prayer at his high school commencement, and, like Jessica, was demonized for acting out of a moral obligation to protect the separation of church and state. Atheists have been a historically deviant and socially excluded population (Cimino and Smith, 2007; Smith and Cimino, 2012; Smith, 2013). The unprecedented rise of publically acknowledged and open atheism has had mixed effects on members of the so-called movement. Regardless, examples of atheist activism discussed herein show the difficult and potentially dangerous reality of challenging Christian hegemony in the United States. In what follows, we explore atheist activism in the United States as a form of "political deviance" that comprises "direct and explicit acts that either challenge the social order, or the abuse of power and morality by those in the centers" (Ben-Yehuda, 1990, p. 3). The politically deviant acts of atheist activists have helped them rebrand themselves as *new* moral entrepreneurs organizing and performing, individually and collectively, to achieve goals ranging from eliminating anti-atheist discrimination to the total eradication of religion in the public sphere.