

Secular Humanism Beyond Progressive Secularism

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Atheists and secular humanists have always been a minority in American society, and not the most popular one. There are still laws in several states preventing non-theists from holding office. Just as evangelical Protestants up until 100 years ago had a largely optimistic view of the future and the end times, known as postmillennialism, atheists had likewise expected that a progressive, secular “kingdom” would emerge as societies threw off a primitive theistic mindset and matured into educated adulthood. As historian Sidney Warren (1966:231) writes of atheist movements in the 18th and 19th centuries: “Freethinkers never doubted the correctness of their position, for they viewed history as a continuous struggle between the forces of light and darkness. They were, they felt, carrying the torch of reason in an otherwise religious world of bigotry and superstition.” As secular rationalism gained ascendancy in many American institutions, especially universities, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the expectation of a widespread secular revolution was widely shared by organized humanist and atheist leaders and thinkers, as well as by scientists and educational leaders (Smith 2003).

There are differing definitions of secularization, but atheists and secular humanists have historically used the term in the popular sense of naturalistic and scientific thought gaining predominance over supernatural explanations of reality. In referring to the changing views on secularization among secular humanists and atheists, it is the popular version of the theory which this article will examine and for this reason we will use “secularism” as the more accurate term.

The fact that widespread and progressive secularism involving the expansion of non-theism has not occurred in the U.S. and that such a scenario for the future is now questioned by many social scientists has become a major concern of the freethought movement (Berger 1999; Stark and Finke 2000). Yet there is a far from monolithic response to the resurgence of religion among these groups. Some leaders have repudiated their earlier optimism about progressive secularism, while others have held onto this vision, believing that the U.S. will eventually follow Europe into a more secular mode of living. Most participants and members in turn acknowledge the difficulty of being an atheist or secular humanist in American society but nonetheless maintain a hope that secularism will eventually triumph. Even the spate of recent books attacking religion by such writers as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens show both the embattled and triumphant nature of the “new atheism.” The question of how secularism can survive and even thrive in a religious and pluralistic society has become pressing both for atheists and secular humanists and for social scientists studying these movements.

Secular Humanism Past and Present

Throughout its history in the U.S., secular humanism has gradually disassociated itself from any religious connotations and ties with organized religion. Contemporary secular humanism in the U.S. developed from two strains: the atheist-freethought movement, and the “religious humanism” which stemmed from Unitarianism and Universalism. The latter emerged in the U.S. after a segment of Congregational churches in the 18th century rejected such key Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the teaching that God can condemn people to hell. Unitarian-Universalism grew increasingly liberal in later periods as it questioned other traditional beliefs,

including theism. In 1933, a document called *The Humanist Manifesto* was issued largely by Unitarians, calling for a world community based on secular and liberal values. The fledgling movement based around the manifesto was called “religious humanism” (Walter 1998). The use of the term “religious” was meant to stress experiences and activities which are humanly significant, while excluding any supernatural beliefs and explanations of reality.

In an effort to emphasize the secular dimension, the *Humanist Manifesto II* in 1973 removed any reference to religious humanism. In fact, the document asserted that while some humanists may prefer the religious label, such redefinitions of religion “often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms.” It instead called for “radically new human purposes and goals.” A greater role for technology and science, as well as an affirmative view of population control, environmentalism and democracy were also evident in the revised document (Lamont 1990). The use of a religious framework was the main factor in the schism within the primary religious humanist group, the American Humanist Association (AHA), in the late 1970s, and resulted in the birth of the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980, later to be renamed the Council for Secular Humanism.

In its 25 years of existence, the Council has attempted to change the face of the freethought movement in the U.S. The more traditional strategy of organizing freethinkers into congregations and local societies (in some cases holding church-like services) was seen as a dismal failure in expanding and recruiting for the movement. The council has stressed international outreach to elites, particularly targeting opinion leaders and the media and entertainment worlds. The original solitary goal of publishing its magazine, *Free Inquiry* was broadened to include the creation of a greater sense of community among secular humanists and bringing its message to

other secular and skeptical Americans seeking support and resources. During the 1990's specialized humanist groups were formed, such as African-Americans for Humanism, Secular Organizations for Sobriety, which serves as a nontheist alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous and other addiction programs, and a secular relief organization. In 1996, the Council founded the Campus Freethought Alliance, now called Center for Inquiry on Campus (CFIC), which has shown fairly rapid growth, enlisting students and faculty in over 142 universities and colleges around the country. Student freethought groups have formed in the Bible belt, giving atheist and secular humanist students a support system in the face of overwhelming conservative Christian involvement on campus. Debates and even cooperation on joint programs are held with Christian groups on these campuses. CFIC has also sprouted up in less expected places, such as Ivy League schools, where the trend of postmodernism has galvanized secular humanist students, who criticize what they see as the decreasing emphasis on reason in academia. The focus on outreach can also be seen in the formation of Centers for Inquiry (CFI), which are educational and outreach centers that coordinate secular humanist and skeptical activity in a given region. The centers in New York and Los Angeles, for instance, target the media and entertainment worlds with the secular humanist message. Television, radio and film have been put to use by CFI. There are a reported 876 groups affiliated with CFI (including 122 local secular humanist groups around the country).

In comparison, the American Atheist organization has just 2,000 members. The more hard-line stance of American Atheists, stating that its primary goal is to defend and promote atheism, is often contrasted by humanists with their more positive approach, which offers a system of ethics and values. Along with the AHA, other groups holding to a non-theist humanist

orientation include Ethical Culture and Humanistic Judaism. Throughout this article, we refer to secular humanism as a movement represented by the Council for Secular Humanism, although non-theists outside the organization also use this term. The terms “secular humanism” and “atheism” are treated as separate though related movements except when otherwise noted. The terms “freethought” and “freethinker,” however, are used to include all secular, non-theist groups and individuals.

Despite these developments among freethinkers, there has been little research on the organizational aspects of atheism and secular humanism in the U.S., aside from treatments of controversial figure Madalyn Murray-O’Hare (Le Beau 2003). There has been some new survey research among non-theists, with one prominent study finding weak social ties among atheists as compared to religious believers (Bainbridge 2005). There have also been sociological studies of the humanist movements in Europe, where they have had a stronger base of support (Budd 1977; Campbell 1972). Recent attention has been paid to the historical roots of freethought in the U.S., with an attempt to update the situation to the contemporary period and expand the concept of freethought to include religious liberals and nonconformists (Jacoby 2004). The most important recent research, both for scholars studying these movements and for secular humanists and atheists themselves, has been the American Religious Identification Survey (Keysar, et al. 2001). Although its implications are contested, this study found an increase in Americans claiming no religion from seven percent in 1990 to 14 percent in 2001. Though the increase has been hailed by atheists and secular humanists as a victory for secularism, the situation is far more complex.

This article argues that the actions and interactions of atheist and secular humanist groups and leaders--even among those holding to a strongly secularist view of the future-- reveal how

they have internalized both their minority status and the failure of progressive secularism in the U.S. by following three strategies in their attempts to survive and grow in a largely religious society. First, they are competing and repositioning themselves to attract “secular seekers,” who are similar to spiritual seekers or “questers” in their persistent search for authentic communities of meaning while remaining highly individualistic (Roof 1999). Secondly, secular humanists and other freethinkers have borrowed elements from their main antagonists, evangelical Protestants, in defining themselves and rallying others to the cause. Finally, they have taken up identity politics and discourse in pressing for group rights and equal treatment in society.

As with evangelicals and minority groups, secular humanists and atheists have assumed a subcultural position that stresses maintaining and reinforcing group identity and boundaries in the face of a larger external threat. Subcultural theory maintains that such a tension with society can strengthen the particular beliefs and practices of a group. In comparison to evangelicals, to borrow Christian Smith’s terminology (1998), secular humanists and atheists obviously feel “embattled” by society, even if it is less evident that they are “thriving.” The religious economy theory holds that a persistent, if small, minority will reject organized religion, though this segment of non-believers may be too small and weak to create a distinct niche for secularism in society (Stark and Finke 2000:209). But this article argues that freethinkers, and secular humanists in particular, now tend to see themselves occupying a specific niche as a secular alternative in the religious marketplace and have engaged in a process of institution building and even competition with both secular and religious groups.

METHODS

This article examines recent developments in atheist and secular humanist organizations through interviews with members of these groups, participant observation of atheist/secular humanist meetings and gatherings, as well as a content analysis of *Free Inquiry*, the bimonthly magazine of the Council for Secular Humanism. Thirty seven interviews with participants and leaders of secular humanist organizations were conducted between the period of September 2002 and February of 2006. The interviews were each approximately an hour in length. Fifteen interviews were conducted in the New York metropolitan area and 12 in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Ten additional, briefer interviews were conducted with participants in the national Godless March on Washington, DC, November 2002. The interviews covered secular humanists' life histories, including their religious backgrounds and training or lack thereof, the events leading to their espousal of secular humanist teachings and philosophy, and their involvement in the organized expressions of these movements. Additional questions focused on changes in lifestyles and attitudes since participating in secular humanist/atheist organizations, as well as the respondents' views on issues having to do with the "culture wars," such as abortion, church-state separation, gay rights and euthanasia. Finally, respondents were asked about their status in society, such as whether they felt like minorities in their work and social lives, and how they viewed the future role of religion and secularism in American society.

Participant observation was carried out from 2002 to 2004 at 10 meetings affiliated with The American Humanist Association, the Center for Inquiry (the umbrella organization for most secular humanist groups), American Atheists, and African-American Humanists in New York,

New Jersey and Tulsa, Oklahoma. Additional participation observation was conducted at the Godless March on Washington in 2002. Content analysis of *Free Inquiry* covered the period of the magazine's founding, 1980 to 2005. Every issue of the magazine was examined according to the criteria stated above in the interviews, as well as posing the central question of this study: how do secular humanists respond to the failure of secularism to take hold in the U.S?

Thirty of the interviews were conducted with individuals self-identifying as humanists or secular humanists in the mode of the Council for Secular Humanism. While at an organizational and leadership level, secular humanists have attempted to differentiate themselves from other freethinkers, at a participant level, there is considerable movement and overlap between groups, particularly in a strongly religious state such as Oklahoma. There, isolated self-identified secular humanists may participate in a Unitarian-Universalist church and religious humanist (as represented by the American Humanist Association) and atheist organizations. In the more diverse and secular New York area there was stronger identification among participants with particular freethought groups. Here too, however, there is interchange between the different groups at special events sponsored by their respective organizations.

RESULTS

Losing Faith in Progressive Secularism

Optimism about the eventual victory of secularism has historically been the rule rather than the exception in organized freethought movements. Philosopher Corliss Lamont (1990), often considered the father of modern secular humanism, fully expected that organized religion

would continue to decline into irrelevance and obscurity late in the 20th century. The *Humanist Manifesto* in 1933 and the *Humanist Manifesto II* of 1973, considered to be the charters of the organized humanist movement in the U.S., both viewed secularism as ascending, with the *Humanist Manifesto II* predicting that the 21st century would be the “humanist century,” as new strides in morals, ethics and technology replaced older religious systems. Such changes as greater availability of birth control, abortion and divorce were thought to signal a moral revolution that would overturn religious values. Certainty about eventual secularism is still asserted by some freethought leaders; as Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, said during an interview: “Religion is on the wane. That’s why there is government support [for it]. That’s why it’s going to the schools...and to Capital Hill. Today religion is being bailed out by the government. That’s why religion is equated with patriotism.”

Less optimistic, the drafters of an updated *Humanist Manifesto 2000* (1999:6) stated that “the world is now divided, as fundamentalisms have rekindled, contesting the principles of humanism and secularism and demanding a return to the religiosity of a premodern era.” There is clearly a loss of confidence among secular humanist leaders regarding the victory of secularism, at least in U.S. society. This is apparent also in issues of *Free Inquiry*, the magazine of the Council for Secular Humanism. One issue, headlined, “Anywhere But Here,” bemoans how the U.S. stands as an exception to the way “the developed world is becoming more secular.” The articles offer a variety of explanations for the persistence and growth of religion in the U.S., ranging from sociobiological theories that humans have an unfortunate genetic propensity for belief, to the rational choice theory and, finally, to the view that Americans are simply less educated than Europeans. Regarding the last suggestion, one contributor concludes that “Basically, we face an

education problem: better informing Americans about the proven advantages of rationally based moral and social values may be necessary to speed up modernizing America into a normal, secularized developed democracy” (Paul 2002:28).

Acknowledging the attractions of religions, Paul Kurtz, the leader and founder of the Council for Secular Humanism suggests that they “will continue with us in the foreseeable future and will not easily wither away,” since, for the “bulk of humankind,” religion presents “moral poetry, aesthetic inspiration, reformatory ceremonial rituals, which act out and dramatize the human condition and...seek to slake the thirst for meaning and purpose” (Kurtz 2002a). With this insight, he has elsewhere called for new rituals and rites of passage to serve as a substitute for theistic rituals (Kurtz 2003).

At a participant level in secular humanist and other freethought groups, we found that members often viewed themselves as an embattled minority with an uncertain future in religious America, but like their more optimistic leaders of the 1970s, they continue to hope that secularism will eventually win the day. Alan, a 35-year-old secular humanist interviewed in Tulsa, Oklahoma, neatly summed up this line of thought: “Don’t you know Oral Roberts is over here [by] one mile? So, we are talking in the shadow of the prayer tower...I think there will always be a small group of people, like us, who will be critical thinkers and who will reject the dogma that’s handed to us from the time we are children. I think the masses will continue [in religion].” In New York, there was the same positioning with regard to the religious drift of the greater society. Barbara, a 70 year-old member of a Long Island secular humanist group, said she has given up hope of convincing “those who believe the whole kit and caboodle of religion. You really can’t argue with them. We have [to realize] we live in a theistic world.” At the same time, many

of those interviewed said that the pendulum may eventually swing to a more secular mode of life, perhaps following some change wrought by science.

A renewed hope that religion is on the wane and secularism is growing is expressed in an optimistic if faulty reading of CUNY's American Religious Identification Survey, suggesting secularist growth. The survey found that the percentage of Americans claiming no religion had increased from seven to 14 percent since 1990. This finding was often repeated by secular humanist and atheist groups as a major advance for secularism in the U.S. (Kurtz 2002b; Duncan 2004). In an interview, Ellen Johnson of American Atheists, cited the 14 percent figure as showing there are 30 million "non-believers" in the U.S.-- "more than most denominations and almost as much as the 45 million evangelicals." The 14 percent figure has served as a rallying call for atheists and other freethinkers to enter the political arena and engage in greater activism to make their voice heard. However, the CUNY study actually found that only two or three percent of this 14 percent who professed no religion described their outlook as completely secular (Key-sar, et al. 2003). A speaker at a meeting of secular humanists in New York in the spring of 2003 acknowledged this, but hopefully asserted that the 14 percent may represent those "questing" toward secular humanism and atheism.

The widespread use of the 14 percent figure in freethought circles, even when qualified, is not only a means of shoring up non-theist self-confidence. It is, more importantly, a tool for outreach and even competition among these groups, suggesting that they are taking a page from religious groups as they move beyond the paradigm of progressive secularism. As we have been told in several interviews with secular humanists, even if only three or four percent of Americans

are secular non-believers, that represents a huge pool in which to draw seekers into the various freethought and atheist groups and eventually into activism for the cause.

Secular Seeking

The loss of certainty about the progress of secularism in American society among secular humanists has driven them in the direction of seeking new forms of community and support. In his attempt to map out the moral and religious terrain of baby boomers, Wade Clark Roof (1999) points to four broad groupings: questers or spiritual seekers, born-again Christians, dogmatists, and secularists. While many of the core members of secular humanist and atheist groups are older, in our observation, the growth that has taken place in these organizations has largely been among the baby boom generation. Though they differ in their ultimate affiliations, secularists and spiritual seekers alike share an initial sense of fragmentation as they sort through a menu of options in quest of a support and meaning system. We agree with Roof that those baby boomers most influenced by the changes and revolutions of the 1960s, which emphasized personal autonomy and the questioning of traditional authority and norms, are the most secular of their peers. David, a 48-year-old secular humanist from New York, stated in an interview that he was “very into 60s culture. The most progressive ideas in the sixties didn’t come from religious people....The Kennedy administration...the social activists; all of the compassion of that time did not come from religious people. The religious people back then were the ones saying ‘Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps.’ The ascent of faith-based social policies today is just the escalation of those cruel policies.”

Like their questing counterparts, secularists express a desire for a community which allows for personal exploration, independent of traditional authority and which also offers a place in which to raise and educate their children. This interest often leads to involvement in organized groups. Many of our interviewees underwent a gradual process of finding and constructing an atheist or secular humanist identity, often including involvement in various humanist and liberal religious groups. Becoming involved in secular humanism was for many a way of claiming a positive identity, whereas claiming the atheist label was often viewed as just being against religion. For their part, atheists often criticized self-identifying secular humanists for discarding the atheist label in order to avoid controversy and derision in society.

Jonathan, a 47-year-old musician and real estate broker in New York, was brought up in a nominally Jewish home, but never considered himself very religious. When he got married, he tried attending a Reform Jewish temple with his wife, a Catholic. “My wife wanted to have some religion and she didn’t care what it was. Judaism seemed less problematic. It’s less of a faith-based perspective, less about being redeemed and all that other stuff.” They went through classes at the synagogue, but he grew dissatisfied. “Even that disgusted me. There was no way I could do it. I’d be a hypocrite. I think everyone believed it because they [thought] everyone else was believing it.”

But with the birth of his daughter, Jonathan realized that he needed a “community that represents something I believe in.” By that time he had developed a non-judgmental belief system based on his idea that owing to genetics, people do not have free will, are not responsible for their actions and that it is therefore impossible to judge others. Through the Internet he still was looking for some group or community in which to raise his child. Although secular humanism

carried a strong belief in free will, he found this belief system closest to his own and began to participate in secular humanist activities in the New York area.

Many of those we interviewed made the transition from religious beliefs and belonging to secular humanism with a stopover at a Unitarian-Universalist (UU) or a liberal Protestant congregation. Since Unitarianism is the main seedbed of much of the humanist movement, it is no surprise that many secular humanists have had contact with this tradition. The move away from Unitarianism is for some partial or gradual, as some still rely on the denomination to provide rites of passage such as weddings and funerals; other secular humanists are increasingly involved in creating their own rituals. The Unitarian-Universalist's larger membership and more stable structures as well as the institutional weight it can exert on social issues are appealing in places where conservative Christianity predominates. The large Unitarian church in Oklahoma draws members of a smaller humanist group to its services and other activities, even though the minister is not a humanist. James, a member of the humanist group in Tulsa, said, "Lately, I'm embarrassed to say that I've been hanging out with the Unitarians. It's, I hate to say, more fun. I go there. I listen to the sermon, which is usually about morality. Sometimes [the minister] hits it from a spiritual angle, but I really enjoy the sermons." The fact that there are more women at the Unitarian church than in the humanist meeting also particularly appeals to this single man.

Still, a growing trend toward Christian or alternative forms of spirituality and away from atheism in Unitarian-Universalism has tended to alienate secular humanists from what was once their strongest ally (Dart 2001). Roger, a 65-year-old teacher, followed a familiar path of secular seeking. Raised Catholic, he adopted an atheist stance through reading philosophy, including the works of Ayn Rand. He was introduced to Ethical Culture and then moved on to Unitarianism.

Since then, as Unitarians have moved to more religious and spiritual teachings, he has distanced himself from the church, joining the American Humanist Association (AHA) and becoming a chaplain with that group. Roger still seeks an alliance with the humanist wing of Unitarianism-Universalism (the UU has humanist, Christian, pagan and other associations within its structure). To his distress, he finds that younger members of religious humanists in the AHA using the language of spirituality. Roger values his involvement in the secular humanist group for providing a sense of community. “I love going to a place where I can speak my mind; where I can say I’m an atheist easily.” The few attempts to create a coalition between these various groups of freethinkers have met with failure. He sees more promise in promoting ties with liberal religious groups to fight the influence of the religious right.

Secular humanist competition with other freethought groups is evident in its claim that it represents the largest and fastest growing segment of the broader movement. The Council’s outreach strategy has shown a measure of success. Its magazines *Free Inquiry* and the *Skeptical Inquirer*, have a combined circulation of approximately 60,000 subscribers. (*Free Inquiry* has 25,000 subscribers and readers and *Skeptical Inquirer* has 35,000 subscribers and readers, a higher circulation figure than other freethought publications.) There is likely some readership overlap between the two magazines, particularly since the *Skeptical Inquirer* has recently moved beyond debunking paranormal phenomenon to include critical treatment of new and traditional religions. The competitive thrust is evident in the way Council officials repeatedly refuse to disclose associate membership figures and instead often cite a much higher 100,000 circulation for *Free Inquiry* and the *Skeptical Inquirer* as the most accurate indicator of its strength. The readership estimates of magazines are admittedly a weak measure of the vitality of a social movement,

but the Council admits that its aim is more to influence and educate the public rather than build a closely-knit membership.

While struggling to create a distinct niche within a non-secular society, secular humanists also realize that they also have to cooperate with like-minded progressive and liberal religionists in order to find a hearing on many issues, a departure from past eras wherein freethinkers condemned liberal and conservative belief systems equally. A recent history of the freethinker movement in the U.S. has broadened the category of “freethought” to include liberal and non-conventional religionists who are viewed as being in agreement on issues such as women’s rights, abortion and strict church-state separation (Jacoby 2004). The Center for Inquiry on Campus takes such an encompassing “big tent” approach, including agnostics and others who support the values of secularism, free speech and rational inquiry. The move to include agnostics in some freethought groups has been cited by McGrath (2004:175) as a departure from a “past firm and principled commitment to the nonexistence of God, and the liberating impact of this belief.” McGrath adds that inclusion of “potential atheists” (and by that logic, potential believers) means that atheism has lost its cutting edge and is now trying to extend numbers in a period of decline and diminished morale.

The future prospects for organized atheism and secular humanism in drawing seekers may also be limited by competition from postmodern philosophy and criticism. *Free Inquiry* magazine has particularly targeted postmodernism (while continuing to criticize traditional religion and occultism) since the 1990s for eclipsing the importance of reason, objective truth, and science. The Center for Inquiry on Campus was founded in part because of concern for the fact that postmodern philosophy and relativism has wide appeal in academia and thus the potential to

influence the current generation of American students. Postmodernism is equally problematic for the religious and secular alike, since postmodern philosophy involves not only a critique of the religious narrative but also of the secular, i.e. of the scientific, rational or anti-religious narrative (Davie 2004). Postmodernism and freethought rationalism are, in a sense, in competition for domination of secular American mentalities (Levitt 2001).

The Evangelical Strategy of Secular Humanism

Evangelicals and fundamentalists envision the contentious and disunited coalition of secular humanists and atheists as their main enemy. In response to such targeting, and along with a loss of faith in the inevitable triumph of their position, many secular humanists have borrowed evangelical concepts and strategies to maintain and grow their numbers. It is the “strong theists” whom atheists and secular humanists view as their main antagonists, rather than mainline Protestantism or Reform Judaism. Campus debates arranged by CFI on Campus challenge evangelicals and other fundamentalists, rather than liberal theists. However, just as secular humanists have adopted evangelical tactics for persuasion, conservative Christian apologists adopt the Enlightenment-based polemics of secular humanism and freethinkers and attempt to prove Christianity through reason. In a debate context, Christian apologetics necessarily shifts evangelical thought in a more mainstream direction, positioning it closer to the liberal allies of secular humanism.

The tendency to define group identity in opposition and to borrow tactics of the opposing group is evident on a linguistic level, in the very term, “secular humanist.” Paul Kurtz’s appropriated the “secular humanist” label, used by the religious right as critique of secular culture. He thus aimed to shift the right’s pejorative use of label to a positive, defiant form of self identifica-

tion. (His appropriation was in fact a reappropriation, as the term “secular humanist” had been in use among freethinkers in the 1960s before it was lifted for use by the religious right). Evangelical leader Tim LaHaye, (among others) who first described “secular humanism” as an amorphous, but conspiratorial movement would eventually target Kurtz and the Council for Secular Humanism as its main architects and proponents (LaHaye 1984; LaHaye and Noebel 2000).

It is the evangelical claim that secular humanism is actually a religion that most vividly suggests how evangelicalism has helped to define the movement. Fundamentalist and evangelical critics claim that secular humanism defends a clearly defined worldview where humanity, reason and science are worshipped instead of God. They support this charge with a 1961 U.S. Supreme Court decision defining humanism as a religion, arguing that if secular humanism is a religion it should not have a privileged place in public schools or in the public square in general. This argument has infuriated Kurtz and his organization, as they insist that secular humanism is only a philosophy built on reason and science, and gives no place to any supernatural or “trans-natural” reality. This insistence on making a distinction between secular humanism and religion has revived old conflicts within the humanist family. The issue of whether humanism is a religion has become particularly prominent in *Free Inquiry*, occupying an increasing number of pages. The sharpest response yet to the controversy was in the Fall 2002 issue, its cover emblazoned with the headline “Drawing Clear Boundaries: Secular and Religious Humanism.” Throughout the issue, religious humanists are taken to task for their semantic and conceptual errors in using the term “religious” and are even accused of cowardice for hiding behind religious terminology “in order to be socially acceptable” for their disassociation from atheists. The fact that some religious humanist groups, such as the Unitarians and the younger members of the AHA,

are using concepts such as spirituality is doubly troublesome for the secular humanists. But most importantly for secular humanists, the religious humanist “simply by existing, gives aid and comfort to the prayer warriors,” in the argument of Editor Tom Flynn, referring to evangelical activists. Indeed, LaHaye and other evangelicals cite writings of religious humanists as proof that secular humanism is a religion (Flynn 2002:41).

Evangelical Christianity and the religious right have also shaped secular humanism in providing an impetus for nominally, formerly uncommitted secular people to become involved in secular humanist and atheist organizations. In our interviews we found that the transition from being an inactive or “nominal” secular individual to becoming involved in secular humanist groups and activism was often instigated by contact and growing concern with individuals and issues associated with the religious right. We found this tendency in interviews conducted in New York as well as in much more evangelically-oriented Tulsa, Oklahoma. As Phyllis, a 53-year-old New York educator and former leftist activist, said, “I didn’t know much about the religious right until I had to work with them. I started seeing what they were about and became very frightened at the rhetoric. I realized the Board of Education in New York is permeated with born-again Christians. The rhetoric was borderline fascist, with attacks on single mothers. I was harassed on the job when [they found out I was an atheist]. It was openly racist and it was coming from black and Hispanic people. But the left wasn’t serious about the born-again threat. The threat to the first amendment was a non-issue for them. I always knew I was an atheist but never saw the need to talk about it until I saw how [these] people were threatening freedom.”

The way in which secular humanists portray their position in society parallels patterns examined in Smith’s study (1998) of American evangelicals, in which he found that the tensions

and unease that evangelicals experience as they interact in the greater American society in fact enhance the vitality of adherents' religious identity. Oppositional relations and interactions between different groups create and sustain a variety of subcultural identities in a pluralistic society. Perceiving and portraying the group as a besieged minority may not strengthen group identity as effectively for secularists as for evangelicals, but the growth of secularist activity and organizations in the last two decades does suggest that increased tensions and oppositions between groups has had a tonic effect on secularist identity.

As was evident in our interviews, the perception that religious conservatives are winning the culture wars through their influence in the Bush administration also strengthens the secular humanist identity. Recent survey research suggests that the right wing politicization of churches in the last two decades alienated a segment of liberal church members, who retreated from institutional religion into the ranks of the unchurched and thus added to the pool of potential secularists (Hout and Fischer 2002). It should be noted that it is the *perception* of being embattled rather than its reality that can drive subcultural formation. The perception of being on the losing side of the culture wars can be found among both the religious conservatives and the secular humanists. It was not unusual for interviewees to acknowledge the secular basis of most modern American institutions while asserting that they have little support from either the media or political and educational establishments in maintaining their secular worldview and lifestyle.

Secular Humanists and Identity Politics

In November of 2002, secular humanists joined with other freethought groups in a Godless March on Washington in order to press for non-discrimination and equal rights for nonbelie-

vers in the U.S. The fact that atheists cannot be elected to office in many states for service there and on a national level was the primary sign of such discrimination to the participants at the march, which was co-sponsored by American Atheists and the Council for Secular Humanism. Ellen Johnson of American Atheists called on participants to borrow the tactics of the religious right in their atheist activism. The march featured passionate speeches on the need to grant equal rights to atheists and other freethinkers, as well as “testimonies” from soldiers, politicians and others describing the hardships of being an atheist in their line of work. The marchers held signs aloft proclaiming freethinker slogans, such as TEACH SCIENCE, NOT SUPERSTITION, as well as ones mocking organized religion, including “9/11 WAS A FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE!” Christian protesters and marchers frequently engaged in verbal jousting; freethinkers accused the Christians of ignorance and the Christians attempted to evangelize the participants. Satire (often in song) and comedy routines generated the greatest enthusiasm and uproar among the crowd of 2,500. A comedian known as “Pastor Deacon Fred” created a stir with a ribald impersonation of a Baptist preacher (often with his audience responding with “Amens”) that quickly turned to mocking Christ, the Bible and other Christian beliefs. As he recited a litany of scandals and controversial issues, from priests sexually abusing altar boys to creationism to the faith of John Ashcroft, he led the crowd in enthusiastically chanting: “You don’t need facts when you have Jesus!” The performance ignited an angry reaction in evangelical and fundamentalist protesters who tried to drown it out with whistles and bullhorns. The police had to intervene, as they moved the protesters away from the gathering, to the far end of the Washington Mall.

When the marchers had first assembled at the destination point to hear the speakers and presentations, there was little camaraderie or even conversation between individuals as they re-

mained in the small cliques in which they had marched. But the speeches, music, and especially the comedy, not to mention the confrontations with Christian protesters, managed to meld these independent freethinkers into something of a convivial community. These freethinkers, who within their particular meetings and groups often engage in open and critical debate amongst and about themselves and their own diverse identities and interests, publicly came together and more or less took their respective and collective interests and identities for granted. In this way, they put on a unified public front (or performance) against what they perceived as a common enemy. Despite different opinions, agendas, identities, and interests, these freethinkers found a common rallying point, *not within but against*. The Christian protestors became the “attentive glue” (any public requiring another public to watch it) that held them all together (Dayan 2005).

To a casual observer, the tweaking and provocation of religious America at the march might seem to be the least effective strategy for atheists to gain political or cultural acceptance among the majority of believing Americans. Such seemingly counterproductive behavior may reveal the tensions between the older atheist belief in inevitable secularization and the more recent realization that freethinkers must learn to survive in a religious society. Aside from the local atheist and secular humanist meetings, there are few avenues where freethinkers can vent their frustrations and sense of alienation from society for their controversial beliefs. Almost every secular humanist and atheist meeting we attended began with a session devoted to poking fun at the foibles of religious groups and people, or with a performance of music satirizing religious themes. In her study of British secular humanists, Susan Budd (1977) finds that the condemnation of religion in these groups can “act as a protective ideology, since it becomes a defining characteristic of the movement and a method of uniting otherwise dissident opinions.” But such protec-

tive mechanisms may also prevent the emergence of a consensus of thought or feeling, a problem that religions escape, with their focus on transcendent ideals that stand outside or above specific issues and politics.

A segment of participants in these groups still believe they are in the forefront of secularism and progress. Humor is an important device for declaring the superiority of free thought and secularism to religious thought. Moreover, it can be used to gain mainstream acceptance, as Herbert, a humanist lawyer at the march noted. “Nothing should be off limits. Why should religion get a pass? One of the ways to have a secular society is for people to be able to laugh at themselves. That’s the important first step.” He also added that the “absurdities of religion have to be exposed. Why shouldn’t religion be held up for ridicule just because most people have [religious beliefs]? Why do we have to hush up just because more people believe than don’t believe?” A 41-year-old atheist activist from California remarked that “We all make fun of everything, including freethought. In a free marketplace of ideas everything is open to ridicule. If there is something that can’t be made fun of, then there’s something wrong.”

Sarcastic attacks on religion also reveal the tensions existing between freethought as a *resistance identity*, i.e. an oppositional identity adopted by those "that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination," and a *project identity*, assumed "when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of [the] overall social structure" (Castells 1997). Whereas the former is firmly entrenched as a subcultural identity, we might say that the latter is a subculture looking to challenge such a status on the basis of that very status. Where a resistance identity confines itself to “building trenches of resis-

tance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to” society, a project identity moves out of the trenches in order to challenge such an identity. The subcultural identity of freethinkers is expressed in their claim they are an embattled minority in need of rights and even protection in a religious and hostile society, and tacitly acknowledges the failure of widespread secularism.

In *Free Inquiry* magazine, as well as in our interviews, there was frequent use of language expressing a minority identity and status, often taken from minority and identity politics. The call for atheists and secular humanists to engage in greater activism to protect their rights is often compared to the women’s rights and gay rights movements. It is fairly common to hear or read of those describing their declaration of themselves as atheist or secular humanist as an act of “coming out of the closet” (Kurtz 2000; Silverman 2003). This was illustrated in an interview with Paul, a 56-year-old businessman in the Washington, D.C. area, during the Godless March on Washington. In his own personal life, he said, “it’s traumatic to be surrounded by a community that is hostile to you. It’s not politically correct to disrespect blacks, gays or the handicapped but it’s still all right to disrespect atheists... Religious people are usually the extremists and they represent a much larger group. But they consider us not to be fully human. One of the things that rules your life when you’re an atheist is fear. You never know when you’re going to be attacked.”

For Paul, the process of “coming out” as an atheist was gradual. He was raised in a conservative Lutheran home. “The first step is realizing that you don’t believe what everyone else believes. Then this little voice in your head [starts] saying that you’re going to hell...The [next] step is saying, ‘I’m an atheist,’ and then saying, ‘I’m an atheist and proud of it.’ That’s the more difficult step.” The recent formation of the Anti-Discrimination Support Network in order to re-

cord and report incidents of discrimination against atheists, secular humanists and other non-theists, exemplifies how a segment of the freethought movement uses identity politics discourse and activism. Addressing a New York secular humanist meeting, Margaret Downey, the network's director, said that she wanted to "empower the atheist community so we don't become easy victims of prejudice." Regarding one Christian television commentator who voiced a negative opinion on atheists, she commented, "We don't want to change her religious views, just her prejudice." Such a defensive posture of claiming minority status stands in sharp contrast to the positive and triumphant statements of inevitable victory of secularism expressed by freethinkers in the last century. Another sign of growing group identity political involvement among freethinkers is the founding of the Center for Atheism in Washington in 2006. The center plans to lobby in the Capitol for the atheist cause and engage in church-state battles.

In the freethought movement's meetings and publications there is much debate about what name might make for a more positive self-image among Americans than that of "atheist" or "secular humanist." There has been some media attention to the effort among one group of atheists to substitute "brights" for the older terms, but little agreement in practice on actually adopting that term (Shermer 2003). Scientist and secular humanist Richard Dawkins argues that adopting the name "brights" and forsaking the older designations of "atheists" or "humanists" would be an exercise in consciousness-raising (Dawkins 2003). Replacing derogatory terms of the past with more positive ones is a tactic frequently employed by many once-stigmatized minority groups seeking to gain a place for themselves in American society, from African-American to gay rights activists. One could even call such a move a standard strategy of contemporary identity politics. As Grant Farred (2000:638) writes, "The struggle for identity has often turned

on the capacity of marginalized groups to set their own political agenda, simultaneously acknowledge, reject, and reinscribe the disjuncture between 'identities imposed' and those desired." One goal of identity politics therefore is "the re-creation of minority histories in a public sphere that had long been hostile or indifferent to narratives of that self and community" (Farred 2000:638). To this end, "identities that start as resistance may induce projects, and may also, along the course of history, become dominant in the institutions of society, thus becoming legitimizing identities to rationalize their domination" (Castells 1997:8).

It should also be noted, however, that a smaller segment of secular humanists and atheists oppose the recent trend of using the language of minority politics to describe their relation to American society. This point is stressed in a *Free Inquiry* article by DJ Grothe and Austin Dacey (2004) entitled "Atheism is not a Civil Rights Issue," in which the authors argue that atheism is a matter of public awareness and education, or consciousness-raising, rather than of civil rights. They argue that "Civil rights struggles are related to a more general approach to social action known as 'identity politics.' In identity politics, people organize around their shared identity rather than their party affiliation or political ideology. This is quite appropriate for groups whose collective, historical experience of oppression has forged some substantial unity in belief and social agenda. Yet atheists have no beliefs in common but their disbelief. Imagine a voting bloc that would back a candidate merely for lacking faith in a personal deity."

CONCLUSION

The expansion of freethought and secular humanist organizations, publications and websites in recent years suggests that they may be filling a niche vacated by religious humanists, Unitarians and other liberal religious groups that have taken a greater interest in spirituality. The percentage of atheists and freethinkers remains relatively constant, though their numbers appear to be rising. It can be argued that there is a “demand” for secular humanism among a small minority of Americans, even if the “supply” for such individualistic consumers would obviously be less stable and rigorous (or strict) than found among religious niches (Stark and Finke 2000). Competition, whether among the various secular, non-theist groups, or between a secular group and a religious organization (such as Unitarian-Universalism) has encouraged innovations and organization-building, as can be seen in the formation of secular humanist self-help and relief groups. The modest degree of tension between organized secular humanism and atheism and the wider society likewise increases commitment to the non-theist cause, even if the individualism and weak social ties of participants mitigate against forming strong community ties and loyalty (Bainbridge 2005).

In its recent history, secular humanism has reasserted its identity and strengthened its boundaries by differentiating itself from religious humanism, Unitarianism and secular postmodernism on the one hand, and atheism, on the other. At the same time, because secular humanism and freethinkers in general are drawing on a very small market share, these movements have attempted to broaden the secular niche to include agnostics, experiment with the use of rituals and rites of passage, and build coalitions with liberal religious groups on various social issues. Their adaptation of evangelical-style and civil rights and identity politics discourse and activism provi-

des a means for secular humanists to press for greater acceptance in American society while maintaining its own subculture.

The secular humanist patterns of interaction and conflict discussed in this article suggest that these freethinkers' hopes and visions of a secular America have been of little use in sustaining an identity within a religious, if pluralistic society. In fact, the real and imagined culture wars and the forging of a subcultural identity may turn out to benefit the secular humanist movement far more than the much hoped for eclipse of faith and dawn of a humanist 21st century.

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