

**Making the American Secular:  
An Ethnographic Study of Organized Nonbelievers and  
Secular Activists in the United States**

Joseph Blankholm

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## ABSTRACT

### **Making the American Secular: An Ethnographic Study of Organized Nonbelievers and Secular Activists in the United States**

Joseph Blankholm

In recent years, the number, size, and budgets of America's nonbeliever organizations have all grown. Though these groups participate in avowedly "secular" coalitions, they relate to religion in diverse ways that the scholars who study them have thus far overlooked. Some groups want nothing to do with religion, some seek to emulate it, and others are avowedly religious. This dissertation is an ethnographic study of the leaders and activists who run these groups and promote secularism. Relying on sixty-five in-depth interviews with group leaders and members, as well as more than two years of participant observation, it situates organized nonbelief within the evolving landscape of American religion. Because existing studies have mapped nonbeliever groups onto a polarized secular/religious spectrum, they have failed to account for the religious diversity *within* the secular. To make it legible, I argue for a rhizomatic framework that attends to the many different ways in which organized nonbelievers imagine the secular/religious boundary and their relationship to it.

Working from the discipline of Religious Studies, I unite two emerging fields that have thus far stood apart: the social scientific study of nonbelievers and the study of the secular and secularism. Drawing from recent theoretical work on the secular, I argue for a more nuanced understanding of the secular/religious boundary, and I demonstrate how it shifts over time and across groups. Drawing from my ethnographic and historical research, I

argue for a new framework that can account for the everyday forms of secularism that bear little resemblance to the pervasive, structuring condition described by theorists. In turn, I argue that scholars should adopt a more reflexive approach that acknowledges their entanglement in making the American secular.

## Table of Contents

Acknowledgements .....	ii
Dedication.....	v
INTRODUCTION: The Ongoing Reconstruction of the Secular .....	1
CHAPTER 1: Religious Pollution .....	48
CHAPTER 2: Secular Religion and Other Hybrids .....	105
CHAPTER 3: The Challenge of Being Secular .....	175
CHAPTER 4: The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular .....	224
CONCLUSION: Toward a Study of the American Secular .....	255
References .....	277

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*To Janet Figueroa*

“For none deny there is a God, but those, for whom it maketh that there were no God.”

—Francis Bacon, “Of Atheism”(1601)

"Nothing is destroyed until it has been replaced."

—Madame de Staël (undated attribution, appearing in G.J. Holyoake’s *The Origin and Nature of Secularism*, 1896)

“‘Lord save me!’ said the barber who was the target of the joke. ‘Is it possible that so many honorable people are saying that this is not a basin but a helmet? This seems to be something that could astonish an entire university, no matter how learned. Enough: if it’s true that this basin is a helmet, then this packsaddle must also be a horse’s harness, just as the gentleman said.’”

—Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote* (1605)

## INTRODUCTION:

### **The Ongoing Reconstruction of the Secular**

When I began this project in 2009, I came to it with a naïve understanding of atheism and the secular. Trained as an anthropologist, I imagined I would find atheism among atheists, and inasmuch as an atheist is secular, I would find secularism there, too. I had equipped myself with Terry Eagleton's wry takedowns of the New Atheists and Talal Asad's genealogies of the secular, and if anyone asked me, I, like Jacques Derrida, "quite rightly pass for an atheist."<sup>1</sup> Bearing what I thought were the theoretical tools I needed to drive a wedge between the etic and the emic and separate myself from those I aimed to investigate, I signed up for every mailing list and Meetup.com group I could find in New York City, and I began my study of the American secular.

On my first few sallies into the world of organized nonbelief, I sometimes found myself confused by the ways in which people talked about "humanism" or being a "skeptic." Mixed in with familiar social scientific terms like "identity" and "movement" were more alien phrases like "Ethical Culture" and "free thinking." When I met atheists who considered themselves religious, I chalked it up to people being complicated and willing to contradict themselves, and I downplayed the chinks in my intellectual armor. Only when I began conducting formal interviews did I realize how little I understood about organized nonbelief in the United States. Immersed in both the field and the historical archive, the alien proved far less unsettling than the uncanny. Years into my research, I discovered how

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<sup>1</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009). Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," in *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155.

useless my tools were for driving the wedge I thought I required for an ethnographic study. In an anthropology of atheism, and especially in an anthropology of the secular, I found myself entangled.<sup>2</sup>

Having accepted my entanglement, I have made this text a description of the many thick cords and finer threads that weave the secular's knot. But more than just a description, this project has also become a partial account of the secular's construction and an argument for how scholars should come to know it. As an ethnography, it surveys the contemporary landscape of nonbeliever organizations in the United States by focusing on the network of leaders and activists who run them, and it takes stock of the disagreements among nonbelievers that spur the creation of new groups, labels, and ideologies. As a dynamic, theoretical account, it studies the tremendous effort required by organized nonbelievers to build the secular, sometimes out of the religious, and to maintain it against the dangers of religious pollution. As an argument for how to understand the secular, this project investigates its centuries-long construction and presents it as an ongoing effort on the part of many, including organized nonbelievers, evangelical Christians, secular activists, state institutions, and scholars. By extension, the dissertation makes the case that organized nonbelievers ought to be studied by scholars of religion and framed within American religion's changing landscape, as well as included in the interdisciplinary study of the secular and secularism. The remainder of this introduction presents each of these aims

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<sup>2</sup> On entanglements, see Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5-18; "Things in Their Entanglements," in *The Post-Secular in Question*, ed. Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 43-76. See also Jeanne Favret-Saada, *Deadly Words: Witchcraft in the Bocage*, trans. Catherine Cullen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

in turn before providing a summary of the chapters that follow.

## **An Ethnographic Study of Organized Nonbelievers and Secular Activists**

### **1. Studying Organized Nonbelievers in the United States**

Over the past decade, the study of atheists and other kinds of nonbelievers has flourished. Based largely in sociology, work in the field has focused on narratives of deconversion, the lived experience of nonbelief, collective identity formation, and social movement mobilization. In 2006, psychologists Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer published the results of a study they conducted among organized nonbelievers, with the aim of describing American atheists more broadly. Avowedly exploratory, they focused on differentiating types of nonbelievers and explaining why certain people become atheists.<sup>3</sup> Phil Zuckerman, the most recognized sociologist of nonbelief and the founder of a secular studies program at Pitzer College, published two large-scale studies of nonbelievers in 2008 and 2012. The first, based in Denmark and Sweden, “analyze[s] the unique contours of the worldviews” of the “nonreligious, irreligious, [and] religiously indifferent,” ventures to explain why some countries are more religious than others, and argues that nonreligious

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<sup>3</sup> Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America's Nonbelievers* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006). Prometheus Books was founded by Paul Kurtz, the founder and former leader of several of the major nonbeliever and skeptic organizations in the United States. Kurtz's son Jonathan now runs the publishing house. Until the boom in interest in nonbelief and the secular that emerged over the past decade, Prometheus was the sole publisher of many books related to atheism and freethought, and this dissertation contains numerous references to its titles.

people are just as happy if not happier the religious.<sup>4</sup> Zuckerman's second study focuses on nonbelievers in the United States and explores how and why people become nonreligious by describing the personality traits and life experiences that these individuals often share.<sup>5</sup>

In 2007, Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith published an article in *Sociology of Religion* that inaugurated the current upward trend in the study of America's organized nonbelievers, and the pair has since contributed several more articles relating to similar themes of collective identity formation and social movement mobilization.<sup>6</sup> In 2014, they repackaged several of those papers into a volume, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism & Community in America*, which is the first nationwide social scientific study of organized nonbelief in the United States.<sup>7</sup> Focusing on the local level, Jesse M. Smith has published two articles on atheist groups that describe the process of collective identity formation, and Stephen LeDrew has published an indirect response to Smith that seeks to nuance the multiple ways in which individuals arrive at an atheist identity.<sup>8</sup> Katja Guenther, Kerry

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<sup>4</sup> Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us about Contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), 4-5.

<sup>5</sup> Phil Zuckerman, *Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>6</sup> Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, "Secular Humanism and Atheism Beyond Progressive Secularism," *Sociology of Religion* 68:4 (2007): 407-24; "The New Atheism and the Formation of the Imagined Secularist Community," *Journal of Media and Religion* 10:1 (2011): 24-38. Christopher Smith and Richard Cimino, "Atheisms Unbound: The Role of the New Media in the Formation of a Secularist Identity," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 1:1 (2012): 17-31.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism & Community in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Jesse M. Smith, "Becoming an Atheist in America: Constructing Identity and Meaning from the Rejection of Theism," *Sociology of Religion* 72:2 (2011): 215-37; "Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52:1 (2013): 80-99. Stephen LeDrew, "Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism," *Sociology of Religion* 74:4

Mulligan, and Cameron Papp have also published on the subject of atheist identity formation while linking those local groups to a national social movement.<sup>9</sup> Stephen Kettell has argued directly for the existence of such a movement and speculated about its future and effectiveness.<sup>10</sup>

These studies have all observed that organized nonbelievers often define themselves against conservative Christians in constructing their collective identities. Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp have also observed that nonbelievers' "boundary work" involves crossing those boundaries, inasmuch as nonbeliever groups count the formerly religious among their ranks. In calling for a "critical sociology of atheism," LeDrew considers atheism and religion "two sides of the same coin," by which he means that they are both ideologies with political implications.<sup>11</sup> Cimino and Smith are most aware of the diversity among organized nonbelievers because they have conducted research among religious humanists and are cognizant of the religious origins of American nontheistic humanism. Though they acknowledge this hybridity, or boundary crossing, they do not consider its implications for the study of nonbelief, the secular, or religion. American social scientists have largely published their research on organized nonbelievers in journals

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(2013): 431–53. Smith and LeDrew also exchanged responses in the same issue of *Sociology of Religion* in which LeDrew's article appeared.

<sup>9</sup> Katja M. Guenther, Kerry Mulligan, and Cameron Papp, "From the Outside In: Crossing Boundaries to Build Collective Identity in the New Atheist Movement," *Social Problems* 60:4 (2013): 457–75. See also Guenther, "Bounded by Disbelief: How Atheists in the United States Differentiate themselves from Religious Believers," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29:1 (2014), 1-16.

<sup>10</sup> Stephen Kettell, "Faithless: The Politics of New Atheism," *Secularism and Nonreligion* 2 (2013); "Divided We Stand: The Politics of the Atheist Movement in the United States," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29:3 (2014): 377-391.

<sup>11</sup> Guenther et al., 458. LeDrew, "Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism," *Sociology of Religion* 74:4 (2013): 464-470 [469].

focused on the sociology of religion, but they have positioned it firmly within the literature on social movements and have avoided framing nonbeliever groups as part of America's evolving religious landscape.

For example, an anonymous reviewer for a manuscript I co-authored that is currently under review at a journal focused on the social scientific study of religion requested that we remove any reference to nonbeliever groups as religious or like religious groups, despite the fact that most groups that identify with Humanistic Judaism or Ethical Culture consider themselves religious. In the framework this dissertation presents, scholars who want to keep the study of nonbelievers out of the study of religion and avoid calling these groups religious or like religion are constructing the same boundaries that organized nonbelievers work so hard to build among themselves, and they are doing so for similar reasons. This isomorphism is no coincidence, and it provides the impetus for this dissertation's claim that not only should scholars study organized nonbelievers from the perspective of religious studies, but they should also acknowledge that they are fellow actors in the ongoing construction of the religious, the secular, and their shifting and often porous boundary.

## **2. A Field Twice Begun**

The social scientific study of nonbelievers began in the late 1960s and early 70s, though it faded quickly and failed to catalyze into a field. In its first iteration, it grew out of the social scientific study of religion, and its early pioneers debated whether to study nonbeliever organizations as religious, secular, or something in between. One of the first



publications on the subject arose from the Vatican's Secretariat for Non-Believers, which gathered theologians and social scientists for a symposium on "the Culture of Unbelief" in Rome in 1969.<sup>12</sup> Sociologist Peter Berger, who chaired the symposium, quipped in his foreword to an account of the proceedings that the Vatican invited so many sociologists because they "play[ed] the role of auxiliary detectives," tasked with locating the hard to identify "nonbelievers" with which the Secretariat sought a dialogue.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps because of the context and the Vatican's conscious attempt to lay the groundwork for communication between two groups assumed to mirror one another, scholars considered the study of nonbelievers from within the sociology of religion and remained self-reflexive about the assumptions they inherit from Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. Absent from the symposium was N.J. Demerath III, whose pioneering work on organized nonbelievers raises a similar question of where and how to locate them as an object of study.<sup>14</sup>

In 1971, Colin Campbell published *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, a prescient book that outlined many of the key questions that researchers studying organized nonbelievers continue to face.<sup>15</sup> Responding to some of the essays in *The Culture of Unbelief*, Campbell couched his study in theoretical debates over secularization and the proper aims of sociology. Because much of the research on nonbeliever groups published in the late 1960s

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<sup>12</sup> Peter Berger, "Foreword," *The Culture of Unbelief: Studies and Proceedings from the First International Symposium on Belief Held at Rome, March 22-27, 1969*, ed. Rocco Caporale and Antonio Grumelli (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971), viii-ix.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, ix.

<sup>14</sup> N.J. Demerath III and Victor Thiessen, "On Spitting Against the Wind: Organizational Precariousness and American Irreligion," *American Journal of Sociology* 71:6 (1966): 674-687 [675]. Demerath, "Irreligion, A-Religion, and the Rise of the Religion-Less Church: Two Case Studies in Organizational Convergence," *Sociological Analysis* 30:4 (1969): 191-203.

<sup>15</sup> Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972 [London: Macmillan, 1971]).

and early 70s compared them to religious organizations, Campbell aimed to accomplish the inverse of this dissertation by bringing the study of nonbelief out of the study of religion, narrowly construed, and into the broader study of organizations, interest groups, and political movements.<sup>16</sup> He hoped to expand the sociology of religion given new theoretical developments and new objects of study:

[W]ithin the sociology of religion... there have been signs of a growing realisation that the boundaries of the discipline need to be redrawn. At the same time that increasing doubt is being thrown on traditional methods of distinguishing religious and non-religious phenomena, so the traditional restrictions on what constitutes a 'religion' are becoming blurred. In addition, the distinctions within 'the non-religious' are being commented on for the first time. All this is suggestive of a major state of flux and it seems clear that when the boundary lines emerge again, a clear place will be allotted to irreligion.<sup>17</sup>

Campbell's assessment of the sociology of religion could apply equally today given recent developments in the study of new religious movements, parody religions, and metaphysical religion, and especially given the rise of the religiously unaffiliated—a symptom of obsolete demographic categories that I discuss at greater length below.

Though Campbell imagined himself inaugurating a new subfield in sociology, it took forty more years for it to fully emerge, and British researchers have continued to play a key role in its development. In November of 2008, Oxbridge Ph.D. students Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee founded the Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network as an online home for what they perceived was a growing interest.<sup>18</sup> In 2013, the pair helped Campbell publish a new edition of *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, for which Lee wrote an

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 42-43. Campbell seems unaware of Demerath's 1969 article in *Sociological Analysis* cited above, which handles some of his concerns quite carefully.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Lois Lee, "About Us," *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network*, December 14, 2011, available at <http://nsrn.net/about/>, accessed March 25, 2015.

introduction.<sup>19</sup> Bullivant's work has focused mostly on Catholic theology and atheism, though he has also written articles from a social scientific perspective, and he is co-editor of the recent *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*.<sup>20</sup> Lee's dissertation and forthcoming monograph study how those who identify as "not religious" or "nonreligious" understand "religious" things and their relationship to them.<sup>21</sup>

Lee has also attempted to establish definitions of "nonreligion" and "secularity" for the field going forward.<sup>22</sup> "Nonreligion," she suggests, describes "anything that is identified by how it differs from religion," including New Atheism and humanist life-cycle rituals.<sup>23</sup> "Secularity" is linked to "secularization" and is "a concept used analytically to study the relative significance of religion."<sup>24</sup> "Nonreligion" describes positive manifestations,

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<sup>19</sup> Colin Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (WritersPrintShop/Alcuin Academics: 2013). See also, Colin Campbell, "The Resurrection of the Sociology of Irreligion," *Nonreligion and Secularity Research Network*, January 9, 2014, available at <http://blog.nsrn.net/2014/01/09/the-resurrection-of-the-sociology-of-irreligion/>, accessed March 25, 2015.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Bullivant, *The Salvation of Atheists and Catholic Dogmatic Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); "Research Note: Sociology and the Study of Atheism," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 23:3 (2008): 363-368; "Not So Indifferent After All? Self-Conscious Atheism and the Secularisation Thesis," *Approaching Religion* 2:1 (2012), 100-106. Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee, "Interdisciplinary Studies of Non-religion and Secularity: State of the Union," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27:1 (2012): 19-27. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Lois Lee, "Being Secular: Towards Separate Sociologies of Secularity, Nonreligion and Epistemological Culture," Unexamined PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2012. See also Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief and Social Identity in the Modern World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> Lois Lee, "Research Note: Talking about a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27:1 (2012): 129-139; "Talking About a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-Religion Studies," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27:1 (2014): 129-139.

<sup>23</sup> Lee, "Talking About a Revolution," 468-69.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 469.

affirmations, and avowals framed in contradistinction to religion, and “secularity” describes religion’s negative decline, restriction, or marginalization. Though this taxonomy might be viable in contemporary Britain, the first two chapters of this dissertation demonstrate that the persistence of religious humanism in the United States and the complex historical entanglements of religion, secularism, and humanism make a description of nonbelievers as “nonreligious” untenable.

Anthropologists of organized nonbelief have adopted the theoretical approaches that most closely resemble my own. In his recent and forthcoming ethnographic research on the British Humanist Association, Matthew Engelke attends closely to the boundary between Christianity and secular humanism and argues that the persistent attempt to reassert it is an anxiety of proximity.<sup>25</sup> Though Engelke ultimately affirms their difference, he argues that doing so requires careful attention to the process of making differences, with a particular focus on language and life-cycle rituals. Johannes Quack’s study of rationalist groups in India ranges widely, and like this dissertation, grounds its ethnography in the history of the various organizations it examines.<sup>26</sup> Quack also demonstrates the transnational and transcultural dimensions of Indian rationalism and its related movements of freethought, atheism, and humanism by describing how Indian rationalist groups negotiate the dual inheritance of materialist traditions from Europe and ancient India.

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew Engelke, “Christianity and the Anthropology of Secular Humanism,” *Current Anthropology* 55:10 (December 2014), 292-301. Engelke also intends to publish an ethnographic monograph based on his research.

<sup>26</sup> Johannes Quack, *Disenchanting India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

### 3. The Study of Religion's Opposite in the Making

Adopting a national scope, chapters one and two survey the major nonbeliever organizations in the United States, though they also draw from ethnographic research among local groups, primarily in the New York City area. The terrain this dissertation maps in its first two chapters is most similar to that covered by Cimino and Smith in *Atheist Awakening*, though like Quack, I attend much more to the histories of organizations and the genealogies of their salient labels. In my engagement with larger theoretical conversations in religious studies, the sociology and anthropology of religion, and the interdisciplinary study of the secular, my approach most closely resembles that of Campbell or Engelke. It is in these chapters that I develop a theory of the purification and hybridity of the boundary between secular and religious, which I discuss in greater detail in the section on theory below.

Chapters three and four are unique case studies that build on the data and arguments presented in chapters one and two. Chapter three analyzes three recent lawsuits filed by three different nonbeliever organizations in the United States by couching them in their wider historical and ethnographic contexts. It contributes to a growing field at the intersection of religious studies, legal studies, and sociology that examines the ways in which the law shapes American understandings of religion and polices the boundaries of the secular and religious.<sup>27</sup> Chapter four contributes most directly to the study of the

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<sup>27</sup> See, for instance, Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Kathleen M. Moore, *The Unfamiliar Abode: Islamic Law in the United States and Britain* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); Isaac Weiner, *Religion Out Loud: Religious Sound, Public Space, and American Pluralism* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert

secular by offering a close reading of a single Congressional briefing held by secular lobbyists and distinguishing among various meanings of the secular and secularism employed by both activists and scholars.<sup>28</sup>

The data collection for this project focused most centrally on the network of leaders and activists who run America's major nonbeliever organizations. To capture the diffuseness of this network, I used a multi-sited approach, and from June of 2010 through November of 2013, I was a participant observer at dozens of lectures, conferences, private meetings, workshops, and social gatherings of local and national nonbeliever organizations throughout the United States.<sup>29</sup> To visit their headquarters and conferences, I traveled to California, Louisiana, Ohio, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Washington D.C., and Wisconsin. Needing to identify relevant nonbeliever organizations and study their ongoing activities, I analyzed hundreds of emails, blog posts, Facebook posts, and postings to online forums, as well as dozens of newsletters, magazines, and postings to a Google discussion group.

From April of 2012 through January of 2013, I conducted sixty-five in-depth interviews with the leaders, former leaders, and members of these groups. Whenever possible, I interviewed my informants in person, and ideally, at the headquarters of the

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A. Yelle, Mateo Taussig-Rubbo, eds., *After Secular Law* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011). See also, "Religious Freedom in the United States," *The Immanent Frame*, available at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/religious-freedom-in-the-us/>, accessed March 25, 2015.

<sup>28</sup> A version of this chapter was published as an article: Joseph Blankholm, "The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular," *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53:4 (2014), 775-790.

<sup>29</sup> George Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24:1 (1995): 95-117.

organization for which an individual worked. Some groups do not have offices, and some of those I interviewed were no longer involved with secular activism, so I interviewed them at cafes and restaurants, and occasionally, at their homes or another location convenient for them to reach. In a few cases, I conducted interviews over the phone with leaders and activists I had met in person, but whom I was unable to interview while we were in the same city. Six of those I interviewed over the phone I had never met. Most of the informants whom I interviewed I reached by chain-referral, either through formal introduction or through recommendation and the use of publicly available contact information. Interviews were semi-structured and covered a wide range of topics, including organizational and personal history, inter-organizational cooperation, and the constellation of labels used by nonbelievers. Because many leaders have published books and contribute articles to mainstream newspapers and magazines, I have studied these materials in preparation for interviews and have tracked their publication since concluding interviews in January of 2013.

Except in one instance when a leader requested that I identify him by name, I have anonymized my informants per ethnographic norms. Because many of the leaders of these organizations are public figures who can be identified easily given only a small number of details, I have disguised certain biographical characteristics, and I have insisted on using general terms like “leader” and “activist,” rather than specific titles like “Executive Director,” “President,” or “Director of Public Policy.” When a person’s primary income has come from an organization, I have generally favored the term “leader,” and when a person has been affiliated with a group but not considered an employee, I have favored the term

“activist.” That said, in a few instances, I have used these terms interchangeably in order to obscure the identity of an interviewee, especially when quoting a former employee or presenting a potentially inflammatory statement.

## **A Theoretical Approach to Studying Nonbelievers and the Secular**

### **1. The Fuzzy Boundaries of American Secularism**

If a field of research on organized nonbelievers has re-emerged only recently, then *why now?* One obvious reason lies with the groups themselves. Over the past decade, their budgets, staff, and membership have all grown, with leaders from the major organizations reporting their largest budgets ever as of late 2012.<sup>30</sup> Over that same period, leaders told me that they began cooperating with other organizations more than ever before.<sup>31</sup> For instance, the Secular Coalition for America and the Openly Secular Coalition have brought together disparate groups like the avowedly religious Society for Humanistic Judaism and the self-described “marines of the freethought movement,” American Atheists. Several of those I interviewed used the metaphor of a “fixed pie” to describe the former way of thinking among organizational leaders. Whereas they used to imagine a limited pool of potential donors for which all of the organizations had to compete, they now view collaboration as a way to draw in new donors by raising the profile of “the movement”—a

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<sup>30</sup> The Center for Inquiry was unclear when sharing information about its finances, but as of March 2015, the group’s endowment “is larger than it ever has been.” See Ronald Lindsay, “Resignation Announcement,” *Center for Inquiry*, March 23, 2015, available at [http://www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/resignation\\_announcement/](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/resignation_announcement/), accessed March 25, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Cimino and Smith observe similar growth and cooperation in their research. See *Atheist Awakening*, 1-8.



phrase I most often heard unqualified, though many will append adjectives like atheist, freethought, humanist, or secular. Leaders and one donor I spoke with also told me that donors themselves have encouraged cooperation among organizations by supporting coalitions and other partnerships and by funding a range of groups. In short, perhaps scholars are paying more attention because there are more nonbeliever groups than ever before, and those groups are larger and more active.

The cause of this rapid growth remains unclear, however. In chapter one, I discuss the anecdotal factors that organizational leaders cite in their writing and during interviews, such as the rise of the internet and the popularity of the New Atheism. Sociologists who study organized nonbelievers have argued for similar causes.<sup>32</sup> Research on the religiously unaffiliated, or the so-called religious “nones” offers another possible narrative for why nonbeliever groups have become more popular, and it supports sociologists’ observations that those who join these groups form their collective identities in opposition to religious conservatives.<sup>33</sup>

In his seminal study, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Robert Wuthnow observes a symbolic realignment through which religious conservatives use the language of morality to intervene in the public sphere, and in turn, religious liberals decry their moral

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<sup>32</sup> See *ibid.* and Kettell, “Divided We Stand.”

<sup>33</sup> Scholarship on the religiously unaffiliated and the coining of the term “nones” also dates back to the late 1960s. See Glenn M. Vernon, “The Religious Nones: A Neglected Category,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 7:2 (1968): 219-229. Vernon makes the excellent point that the term “religious independent” would make more sense because the term “religious none” makes the gratuitous assertion of nonreligiosity (220). See also C. Kirk Hadaway and Wade Clark Roof, “Those Who Stay Religious ‘Nones’ and Those Who Don’t: A Research Note,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 18:2 (1979): 194-200.

rhetoric as religion in disguise.<sup>34</sup> The combined effect of their strategies is the politicization of religion. To many at the time, the cleavage between *religious* liberals and conservatives appeared to correspond to the divisions between *political* liberals and conservatives.<sup>35</sup> As more Americans came to believe in this cleavage, it became “a self-fulfilling prophecy.”<sup>36</sup> Though polarization consolidated and energized the efforts of those at the ends of the spectrum, it alienated many of those in between, setting the stage for the next restructuring. As Wuthnow writes of competing liberal and conservative visions of America, “in the eyes of many middle-of-the-roaders, both sets of arguments may have lost plausibility by virtue of being too much disputed, leaving room for secular ideologies to play an enlarged role in legitimating the nation.”<sup>37</sup> Published in 1988, Wuthnow’s narrative pointed to the possibility that high-profile antagonism between religious liberals and conservatives might cause many to turn away from that which they consider “religion.”

Picking up where Wuthnow left off, Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer observed in 2002 that the proportion of Americans with no religious affiliation had doubled through the 1990s, rising from seven to fourteen percent after remaining relatively stable for the two decades prior.<sup>38</sup> They offered two explanations for this jump: A few percentage points can be explained by demography, in that more Americans than ever had been raised with no religion. They explain the other part of the increase as a result of the rise of the Religious

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<sup>34</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 211-212.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 218.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>38</sup> Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67:2 (2002): 165-166.

Right, which led political moderates and liberals with weak religious attachments to disavow their religious affiliations. Other scholars have shown that the 1990s also inaugurated a period in which high levels of religiosity began predicting membership in the Republican party—with Catholics and Black Protestants being notable exceptions.<sup>39</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, Americans with no religious affiliation are more likely to vote Democrat.<sup>40</sup>

Hout and Fischer show in a recent working paper that the rise of the nones reflects a reversal in a longstanding causal trend: political preferences now predict religious affiliation rather than vice-versa.<sup>41</sup> Writing in *American Grace* in 2010, David Campbell and Robert Putnam agree with Hout and Fischer and confirm Wuthnow's prediction, arguing explicitly that the increasing association of religion with conservative politics spurred a mass exodus from organized religion, especially among young people. In their view, these changes amount to no less than another restructuring of American religion, once again based on political opposition, though this time the new poles of the spectrum are ostensibly religion and the secular.

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<sup>39</sup> David E. Campbell and Robert D. Putnam, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 290-321. See also Geoffrey C. Layman, "Religion and Political Behavior in the United States: The Impact of Beliefs, Commitment, and Affiliation From 1980 to 1994," *The Public Opinion Quarterly* 61:2 (Summer, 1997): 290.

<sup>40</sup> Many commentators have called this the "God gap." See Corwin E. Smidt et al, *The Disappearing God Gap? Religion in the 2008 Presidential Election* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010).

<sup>41</sup> Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, "Explaining Why More Americans Have no Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987-2012," *NYU Population Center: Working Paper Series*, Working Paper No. 2014-03 (June 2014), available at <http://populationcenter.as.nyu.edu/docs/CP/4901/03-HoutFischerWorkingPaper.pdf>, accessed March 25, 2015.

The percentage of Americans with no religious affiliation has continued to grow since Hout and Fischer published their first assessment in 2002. A Pew Report from 2012 showed that nearly one-in-five Americans are nones. The proportion of Americans with no religious affiliation is likely to increase in the coming years, considering that nearly a third of Americans under thirty are unaffiliated.<sup>42</sup> While these statistics might appear to show a growing polarization of “religious” and “secular” Americans, it is important to remember that no religious affiliation does not mean nonreligious. Recent work on the nones has shown that they are a deeply heterogeneous group that includes the spiritual but not religious, unchurched believers, avowed nonbelievers, and those who only intermittently affiliate with a religion.<sup>43</sup> The “nones” label is capacious and misleading, and its growth does not reflect “secularization” in any classic sense so much as a demographic taxonomy that has failed to keep pace with the current sea change.

It is in this context that understanding the “secular” and its various cognates has become so important for the future study of American religion. The existing sociology of organized nonbelievers tells the story of two poles that oppose and constitute one another: political liberals who are secular and political conservatives who are religious. Demographers of American religion tell the same story of secular and religious antagonism, wherein everything between is more and less “religious”: a fuzzy middle bound by the

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<sup>42</sup> Cary Funk, Greg Smith, and Luis Lugo, *“Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012), available at [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/None sOnTheRise-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/None%20OnTheRise-full.pdf), accessed March 25, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, “Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49:4 (2010): 596–618.

evangelical/secular. While many evangelical/seculars might try to live within and reproduce such a narrative, the reality of *being* secular is far messier and contingent than large-scale demographic narratives can depict, even among avowedly nontheistic secular activists whom one might expect to be “secular” unequivocally. As this dissertation demonstrates, the secular has arisen out of and by analogy to the religious as much as it has broken from it, and organized nonbelievers and secular activists have far more promiscuous relationships with religious belief, behavior, and belonging than an oppositional narrative can explain.

In practice, when looking across the range of nonbeliever groups, the secular and the religious are not poles, nor do they constitute a spectrum. To the contrary, their boundary is fluid and contingent, and often ignored and thus illegible. Those who observe it often and insist that it ought to be constructed in a particular way are those who actually build it. Any assumption that the secular must not be religious is itself a relatively recent invention that is radically undermined by the existence of religious humanists and other organized nonbelievers who embrace hybrid forms of the secular/religious. This project is hardly the first to suggest that the secular is more than the mere absence of religion, and the following sub-section situates its approach alongside other recent contributions, including those that have made this one possible.

## 2. Secularization, Secularism, Secularity, and the Secular

Since the early 1990s, a large body of literature has reconsidered secularization theory to account for the so-called return or resurgence of religion.<sup>44</sup> Though sociologists like David Martin have long questioned the theory's assertion that modernization would remove religion from public life, separate it from other "value spheres," and diminish its overall prevalence, the theory's revision has been a slow process, and only in the past few years have scholars situated secularization within the broader secular constellation.<sup>45</sup> Growing from conversations first published on the *Immanent Frame*, an online forum created by the Social Science Research Council and named for a concept from Charles Taylor's *A Secular Age*, a wide range of scholars have not only revised and abandoned

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<sup>44</sup> José Casanova's *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) is often cited as a turning point among sociologists. Peter Berger has charted the rise and fall of the secularization thesis with a revision of his earlier work: *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990 [1967]) and *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1999). I rely on Fenella Cannell for my periodization. See Cannell, "The Anthropology of Secularism," *The Annual Review of Anthropology* 39 (2010): 85-100.

<sup>45</sup> David Martin, "Notes for a General Theory of Secularisation," *European Journal of Sociology* 10:2 (1969): 192-201; *A General Theory of Secularization* (New York: Harper & Row, 1979 [1978]); *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2005). Steve Bruce, Darren Sherkat, and David Hollinger have continued to argue for strong versions of secularization, though especially for Sherkat and Hollinger, this is more a process of de-Christianization than a move away from all forms of religious belief, belonging, and behavior.<sup>45</sup> See Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Sherkat, *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans' Shifting Religious Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013). "Value spheres" is Max Weber's term. See Weber, "Religious Rejections of the World and their Directions," in *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, ed. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 323-362. On the importance of this essay in Weber's corpus, see Robert Bellah, "Max Weber and World-Denying Love: A Look at the Historical Sociology of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 67:2 (1999): 277-304.

secularization theory, but they have also observed how and why it took hold in the first place, identified many of the assumptions on which it depends, and offered new ways of understanding the secular that do not consider it the absence of religion, but rather, a presence of its own.<sup>46</sup>

Three important and relatively early interventions that laid the groundwork for these conversations are Talal Asad's *Formations of the Secular*, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini's essay in *Social Text* that became the edited volume, *Secularisms*, and Christian Smith's introduction to a volume he edited, entitled *The Secular Revolution*.<sup>47</sup> For Asad and for Jakobsen and Pellegrini, secularization is a name for the process that normalized secularism, a condition in which the distinction between secular and religious is assumed to exist and undergirds a wide range of projects constitutive of modernity. By contrast, in Smith's narrative, secularization is the result of an intentional process instigated by a range

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<sup>46</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007). Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, "Introduction," *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and Vanantwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5. See also Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, eds., *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a (not so) Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Michael Warner, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, and Craig Calhoun, eds., *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010); Philip Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan Vanantwerpen, eds., *The Post-Secular in Question* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Timothy Samuel Shah, Alfred C. Stepan, and Monica Duffy Toft, eds., *Rethinking Religion and World Affairs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan Vanantwerpen, eds., *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011); Craig Calhoun, Eduardo Mendieta, and Jonathan Vanantwerpen, eds., *Habermas and Religion* (New York: Polity Press, 2013).

<sup>47</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, "World Secularisms at the Millennium: Introduction," *Social Text* 18:3 (2000): 1-27; eds., *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). Christian Smith, "Introduction," *The Secular Revolution: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 1-96.

of specific actors, many of whom were and are hostile to religion. He assumes a distinction between secular and religious, and his model depends on their polarization along a spectrum.

All three approaches have offered scholars new ways of understanding the secular and delimiting its boundaries. For Asad, secularism is a powerful, global regime that creates certain kinds of subjects who play roles in and reproduce European and American imperialism. For Jakobsen and Pellegrini, secularism is an artifact of Enlightenment thought that many scholars still cling to despite accepting criticisms of its fundamental premises. Inasmuch as it is an actual set of practices throughout the Western-influenced world, it resembles Asad's secularism. For Smith, secularism describes a conspiracy of specific actors who have effected the secularization of American public life.

Each of these approaches is itself a secular formation inasmuch as it is a story about the secular that has proliferated among scholars and impacted their descriptions of the world and how it fits together. Though they all resemble the secularisms that I found among organized nonbelievers and secular activists in the United States, they differ greatly in scale and scope. For instance, Asad's understanding of the secular can certainly contain organized nonbelievers and secular activists because it purports to describe how they think and makes them the non-agentive agents of secularism's proliferation. Yet as a description of those who understand themselves as secular and embrace the term, it vastly overstates their influence. Given their ongoing struggles to recruit members to their movement and get an atheist elected to national office in the United States, many organized nonbelievers would likely admire these versions of secularism, though they would consider



them aspirational, to say the least. Asad's pervasive "secularism" is not theirs, and in its enormity, it occludes the actual role that organized nonbelievers have played in innovating and re-appropriating the secular and its related concepts.

If scholars of the secular have provincialized secularism by localizing its assumptions and foreclosing their universality, then this dissertation could be said to parochialize the secular by cutting it down to size, situating it within and alongside specific religious traditions, and revealing the many ways in which its lived formations fail to live up to the rhetoric that supposedly describes them.<sup>48</sup> My aim is not to assert that organized nonbelievers' version of secularism is the *correct* one, however, nor does it argue that these nonbelievers are wrong. Rather, it considers activists, government bureaucrats, judges, scholars like myself, and many others to be involved in the secular's ongoing reconstruction. In the remainder of this section, I situate this dissertation's approach among the theories mentioned above and others they have influenced in order to outline the scholarly production now underway.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> I borrow the term and concept of "provincialization" from Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).

<sup>49</sup> For other academic taxonomies of the secular and secularism, see Akeel Bilgrami, "Secularism: Its Content and Context," (SSRC Working Papers: October 2011), accessed February 14, 2013, [http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Secularism\\_Its\\_Content\\_and\\_Context.pdf](http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Secularism_Its_Content_and_Context.pdf); Alfred Stepan, "The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democratic and Non-Democratic Regimes," *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 114-144; and José Casanova, "The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms," in *Rethinking Secularism*, 54-74. For an excellent synthesis of much of the existing research on the secular and its related terms, see Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen's introduction to *Rethinking Secularism*.

Adopting the methods of Nietzsche and Foucault, Asad narrates a partial genealogy of the secular, secularism, and secularization that understands them not as mere descriptions, but rather, as normative logics that structure the modern world and fashion certain kinds of subjects in the (often intentional) service of European and American empires. For Asad, the secular and secularism are not coterminous with “modernity,” but they are constitutive of it and vice-versa. The secular and its related terms presuppose and regulate individual agents who can act freely in the pursuit of pleasure and the avoidance of pain, who practice their religion privately, and who must cede control of violence to the secular state. Rewriting the narrative of secularization theory, secularism becomes the means for producing secular modernity, and secularization is the intentional process through which that production occurs.

Asad’s postcolonial approach has influenced a number of anthropological studies.<sup>50</sup> In 2006, Saba Mahmood published an article in which she aimed “to sketch out the particular understanding of secularism underlying contemporary American discourses on Islam” by examining the Muslim World Outreach program established by the White House National Security Council in 2003.<sup>51</sup> The thrust of the article is that secularism does not simply banish religion from public life, but rather, shapes it such that religion corresponds to liberal norms of public and private, makes only certain kinds of epistemological claims, and aids in creating liberal subjects that observe the salient distinctions that the state

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<sup>50</sup> For direct responses to Asad, see David Scott and Charles Hirschkind, eds., *Powers of the Secular Modern: Talal Asad and His Interlocutors* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

<sup>51</sup> Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18:2 (2006): 323-347 [323, 330].

wants to enforce. “Normative secularity” is a contingent product of intentional construction and an imaginary that remakes the world in its own image, according to its imperial needs.<sup>52</sup>

Along with Charles Hirschkind and others, Mahmood has also studied how secularism conditions the performance of gender and assumes certain bodily presentations and forms of sensory engagement.<sup>53</sup> Her ethnography of the women’s piety movement in Egypt concerns the secular inasmuch as it offers her the means through which to interrogate the Western, feminist assumptions with which she began her fieldwork.<sup>54</sup> She analyzes the secular reflexively by observing how the women she studies are often *not* participating in secular modes of being. Hirschkind also observes the secular by way of its others in his ethnographic study of the Islamic Revival in Egypt and the cassette sermons that Muslim men who participate in the movement circulate amongst one another. He attends carefully to the ways in which the cassette medium and its aural demands reproduce ways of being that are unlike the Western forms of subjectivity against which the revival movement is framed. More recently, Hirschkind has written on the secular sensorium, arguing alongside Asad for a broader study of the secular that includes its bodily practices and ways of knowing.<sup>55</sup> Mayanthi Fernando’s ethnography of the French state’s regulation of Muslim bodies and spaces is another significant contribution to the

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 329-330.

<sup>53</sup> See also, Charles Hirschkind and Saba Mahmood, “Feminism, the Taliban, and Politics of Counter-insurgency,” *Anthropological Quarterly* 75:2 (2002): 339–54.

<sup>54</sup> Saba Mahmood, *The Politics of Piety* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

<sup>55</sup> Hirschkind and Asad published their essays in the same volume of *Cultural Anthropology*. See Charles Hirschkind, “Is There a Secular Body?” *Cultural Anthropology* 26:4 (2011): 633-647. Talal Asad, “Thinking about the Secular Body, Pain, and Liberal Politics,” *Cultural Anthropology* 26:4 (2011): 657-675.

Asadian study of the secular, and like this dissertation, it is “an anthropology of the West.”<sup>56</sup> Fernando argues that not only do the French state’s secularist policies disrupt the lives of Muslims living in France, but French Muslims also disrupt the Republic’s secularism by forcing it to reflect on its contradictions.

In their prescient essay on the study of secularism, Jakobsen and Pellegrini also focus on “body regulation” as “a crucial pivot in the religion/secularism relation.”<sup>57</sup> Drawing from the essays collected in the special issue they introduce, they outline the contours of an emerging field and point to the likely theories and methods for its continued study, while also drawing attention to a number of its persistent quagmires. Observing that “the form of secularism depends on the form of religion to which it is related,” they suggest a more ambitious comparative study of secularisms in the plural. Reading Asad’s *Genealogies of Religion*, they also presage a number of his central arguments in *Formations*.<sup>58</sup>

They are especially aware of the reflexive challenges produced by critical studies of the secular and its related terms. Relying on Aamir Mufti’s essay in their special issue, they pose the question of whether critique is secular, and if so, how to critique secularism.<sup>59</sup> They, too, find themselves entangled:

Critiques... [of secularism] don’t provide a new point from which to judge all other practices, whether dominant secular, dominant religious, minority religious, or minority secular. One of the things that the essays in this special issue show is that

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<sup>56</sup> Mayanthi Fernando, *The Republic Unsettled: Muslim French and the Contradictions of Secularism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), vii.

<sup>57</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “World Secularisms,” 2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 8. Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993).

<sup>59</sup> Aamir Mufti, “The Aura of Authenticity,” *Social Text* 18:3 (2000): 87-103.

the boundaries that make for such distinctions are extremely messy.”<sup>60</sup>

Given that many scholars have abandoned the Enlightenment assumptions on which secularism depends, Jakobsen and Pellegrini urge its reformation without presupposing that they can simply step outside of it. They conclude with a call for a new, “hoped-for secularism, one that might be joined to a robust, contestatory, and radical pluralism, [which] may also be one that need not banish religious possibility from its midst.”<sup>61</sup>

Despite rarely being referenced among anthropologists and sociologists studying the secular, Jakobsen and Pellegrini have influenced scholars in other disciplines who have contributed major works to the field, including Tracy Fessenden and Linell Cady.<sup>62</sup> In *Culture and Redemption*,<sup>63</sup> Fessenden demonstrates through an historical account of American literature that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, secularism was far from neutral and often furthered the interests of a Protestant majority against non-

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<sup>60</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “World Secularisms,” 24.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>62</sup> For instance, the pair’s work on secularism is absent from Asad’s *Formations of the Secular*, Mahmood’s *Politics of Piety*, Hirschkind’s *The Ethical Soundscape* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) and Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen’s introduction to *Rethinking Secularism*. They and even Mufti are also absent from *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009), a collection of contributions on the topic written by Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, and Saba Mahmood. Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). For volumes that engage with Pellegrini and Jakobsen, see Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Linell E. Cady and Tracy Fessenden, eds., *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013). Jakobsen and Pellegrini are also absent from Hurd’s earlier work, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008).

<sup>63</sup> Fessenden, who published a chapter in Jakobsen and Pellegrini’s *Secularisms* volume, opens *Culture and Redemption* with an early footnote appreciating the pair’s “World Secularisms” essay: footnote 5 of the “Introduction,” which appears on page 219.

Protestant minorities like Catholics, Mormons, and Native Americans.<sup>64</sup> She develops a compelling account of what Jakobsen and Pellegrini call “secularized Protestantism” and “Christian secularism,”<sup>65</sup> demonstrating “how particular forms of Protestantism emerged as an ‘unmarked category’ in American religious and literary history, in order also to show how a particular strain of post-Protestant secularism, often blind to its own exclusions, became normative for understanding that history.”<sup>66</sup> Despite the focus on Protestantism’s close relationship with secularism in the early chapters of *Culture and Redemption*, Fessenden remains sensitive to the ways in which American religion extends “beyond the Protestant-secular continuum” and many of its religions “resist being plotted along a spectrum extending from Protestant conviction to its absence.”<sup>67</sup> This dissertation agrees with her view that religion/secular is not a mere binary, and by extension, American “religiosity” is not a single factor that increases and decreases on a numerical scale from purity to nothingness.<sup>68</sup>

Smith also considers secularization to be a contingent process of construction,

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<sup>64</sup> Philip Hamburger makes a similar argument, though he focuses primarily on legal developments and avoids the term “secularism” in favor of “separation of church and state” on account of the former’s ambiguity. See Hamburger, *The Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002). For a legal account that is equally critical, but which offers a counter to Hamburger’s highly originalist reading of the Federal Constitution, see David Sehat, *The Myth of American Religious Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011). For a criticism of Hamburger’s originalism that still appreciates Hamburger’s contribution, see Kent Greenawalt’s review essay, “History as Ideology: Philip Hamburger’s *Separation of Church and State*,” *California Law Review* 93:1 (2005): 367-396.

<sup>65</sup> Jakobsen and Pellegrini, “World Secularisms,” 15.

<sup>66</sup> Fessenden, 6.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>68</sup> Courtney Bender and Ann Taves also make this point in their introduction to the edited volume, *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a Not So Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 15-19.

though methodologically, he favors a sociological approach to history, and he focuses more on individual agents. Among the theorists I consider valuable, Smith draws the sharpest distinction between religion and the secular, though attending at times to the messiness of their boundaries. Like Fessenden, he is especially interested in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as key decades in the secularization of American public life, which he considers a slow, partial “revolution” rather than a “natural evolution,” and most certainly not an inevitable, progressive outcome of modernity.<sup>69</sup> In his narrative, secularization is a “triumphant regime” instigated and furthered by “insurgents” endowed with means and authority, which “transformed the basic cultural understanding of the human self and its care.”<sup>70</sup> According to Smith, scholars have overestimated the ways in which religious actors like liberal theologians have effected secularization, and they have not emphasized enough the roles played by “nonreligious” and “antireligious” actors.<sup>71</sup> Like George Marsden, Smith views universities as anti-religious arenas of authority refashioned by a secular elite as vehicles for secularization.<sup>72</sup> In its details, his account is careful to note the various and sometimes contradictory aims of the actors who have contributed to America’s secularization, as well as its failure to become a totalizing project. But in summarizing his own arguments, Smith reduces this nuance to a narrative that polarizes the secular and religious, pitting them against one another in a battle for the control of American public life.

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<sup>69</sup> Smith, “Introduction,” 1.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 24-25.

<sup>72</sup> George Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Nonbelief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Though differing greatly in its theoretical approach, this dissertation resembles Smith's study in its attention to ostensibly "nonreligious" and "antireligious" actors and its attempt to tell a continuous, albeit partial historical narrative that explains the diversity and conflicts among various kinds of secular and religious nonbelievers in America today. Smith and I are both interested primarily in those sites of secular construction that understand themselves as such. By comparison, Asad does not focus on those who understand themselves to be actively creating the secular and who identify with its constellation of terms. He creates his secular by deferring the question of what it is and giving an account of the many things it does, regardless of whether it bears that name or others have labeled it such. This approach ultimately prevents Asad from making the reflexive move that would resituate him *within* the secular.<sup>73</sup> He perpetually defers his embrace of the "not," to use Mark Taylor's term for the aporia of constitutive negation.<sup>74</sup>

John Modern's approach in *Secularism in Antebellum America* resembles that of Asad in its reliance on Foucault and its complex understanding of agency. In Modern's secular formation, Americans circa 1851 are "individuals [who are] integral to systems of their own making."<sup>75</sup> These individuals "may make decisions that are entirely their own despite the fact that the range of available choices has nothing, essentially, to do with them."<sup>76</sup> Like in Smith's account, Modern attends to many particular actors and sustains biographical sketches of several, though unlike Smith, Modern's agents are not creators of a new regime

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<sup>73</sup> See, for instance, Asad's contribution to *Is Critique Secular?*, a question that would ostensibly provide such an opportunity.

<sup>74</sup> Mark C. Taylor, *Notes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

<sup>75</sup> John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), location 4685 of 8444 in *Kindle* version.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*



so much as inheritors, reproducers, and sometimes subversives who generate mutations in secularism's convoluted genealogy. Like that of Asad or Charles Taylor, Modern's formation is broad:

I have chosen the name secularism to refer to that which conditioned not only particular understandings of the religious but also the environment in which these understandings became matters of common sense. Rather than signal a decreasing influence of the religious, secularism names a conceptual environment—emergent since at least the Protestant Reformation and early Enlightenment—that has made “religion” a recognizable and vital thing in the world.<sup>77</sup>

Not separate from religion, but structuring it, secularism and evangelicalism emerge in Modern's narrative as sharing a common ancestor in voluntarism.<sup>78</sup> They are two sides of the same coin, but unlike in LeDrew's metaphor that frames evangelicalism and secularism as mutually constituting antagonisms, secularism is also a name for the coin itself. In Modern's retelling, the ostensible conflict between the religious and the secular is a blood feud more than a culture war.<sup>79</sup>

Though I adopt a different vocabulary and avoid using the name “secularism” for both the whole and the part, I have tried to emulate Modern's negotiation of structure and agency by considering individuals as nodes in a non-totalizing network, the mediating channels of which both facilitate and regulate their relationships to the secular and religious. These relationships are governed by boundaries, but their boundedness is contingent, making them more like conduits, in a sense. Like any medium, the conduit

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., location 508 of 8444.

<sup>78</sup> See especially Modern's reading of conversion narratives and Robert Baird's *Religion in the United States of America* (New York: Arno Press, 1969 [1843]), locations 1517-1640 in *Kindle* version.

<sup>79</sup> On blood as a unifier inherited from Christianity, see Gil Anidjar *Blood: A Critique of Christianity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

mediates: it both enables and regulates the flow between. In the following section, I consider different ways in which scholars have studied boundaries, explaining my own usage of the concept and how I think it aids in understanding the landscape of nonbeliever organizations in the United States. In the section that follows, I return to the question of entanglements and situate my boundary work alongside that of others involved in making the American secular.<sup>80</sup>

### 3. Approaches to the Study of Boundaries

Durkheim, Weber, and Marx all develop independent notions of “boundaries,” and it remains a key concept for social scientists.<sup>81</sup> As discussed above, recent sociological research has argued that organized nonbelievers are often concerned with the secular/religious boundary, constructing their identity as the former through an antagonism with the latter.<sup>82</sup> Cimino and Smith place this antagonism at the core of their work, showing “how atheists and the secular humanists define themselves by their rejection of religious and societal norms, and how their creation of alternative systems of ethics, community, rituals, and even ‘spirituality’ is often shaped and influenced by American religion.”<sup>83</sup> By focusing their analysis on “atheists” and “secular humanists” and never fully integrating groups like Ethical Humanists and Humanistic Jews, Cimino and

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<sup>80</sup> If Modern has written the *Moby-Dick* of secular formations, then I am trying to write the *Don Quixote*. See also, Jorge Luis Borges, “Pierre Menard, Author of the *Quixote*,” in *Collected Fictions*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Viking, 1998).

<sup>81</sup> See Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, “The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences,” *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167-195.

<sup>82</sup> For instance, see LeDrew (2013), Guenther (2014), and Guenther, Mulligan and Papp (2013).

<sup>83</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 148.

Smith maintain the boundary between secular and religious and reproduce a narrative about America's organized nonbelievers that supports the notion of a spectrum bound by two poles. They are right to observe that American religion has "shaped and influenced" organized nonbelief, but they overlook the degree to which organized nonbelief *is part of* American religion. To better understand organized nonbelievers' various complicated relationships with the boundary that ostensibly separates secular and religious, I develop a theoretical framework for approaching boundaries in general, and I adopt a vocabulary of "purity," "pollution," and "hybridity" to describe the ways in which nonbelievers distinguish and elide the secular and religious.

The term "boundary-work" was first coined by Thomas Gieryn to describe the ways in which scientists prevent pseudoscience and other non-science like "religion" from being called "science."<sup>84</sup> According to Gieryn, in a statement that could just as easily sum up one of this dissertation's key observations about the secular, "The boundaries of science are ambiguous, flexible, historically changing, contextually variable, internally inconsistent, and sometimes disputed."<sup>85</sup> Rather than perpetuate the "seemingly interminable debates over the uniqueness and superiority of science among knowledge producing activities," Gieryn suggests treating any "Descriptions of science [that view it] as distinctively truthful, useful, objective or rational" as "ideologies."<sup>86</sup> By calling these descriptions ideologies, he wants to emphasize their contingency, their influence by "strains and interests," and the

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<sup>84</sup> Thomas F. Gieryn, "Boundary-Work and the Demarcation of Science from Non-Science: Strains and Interests in Professional Ideologies of Scientists," *American Sociological Review* 48 (1983): 781-795. See also, Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 792.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 791-92.

“stylistic variation” of their rhetoric.<sup>87</sup> Though I stop short of calling the various formations of the secular “ideologies,” I borrow from Gieryn’s notion of boundary work in part to emphasize that organized nonbelievers, secular activists, and scholars face the same challenges as scientists when staking authority. Their claims are equally contingent, influenced by asymmetries in power, and vary in their style and execution.

Especially when studying the secular, calling its formations “ideologies” would only exacerbate existing entanglements by trying to place the researcher somehow outside of “ideology.” After all, “ideology” was first coined as a name for the “science of ideas” developed by Count Antoine Destutt de Tracy in the late eighteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Intended as a moral and political science, “ideology” provided a replacement for church teachings as “a foundation for public morality” in the wake of the French Revolution.<sup>89</sup> De Tracy’s work would later influence Auguste Comte’s development of Positivism, and in turn, his Religion of Humanity.<sup>90</sup> Derided as a sect and a “College of Atheists,” the *idéologues* were attacked so successfully by Napoleon and Chateaubriand that their positive appellation became Marx’s term for “false consciousness” within just fifty years.<sup>91</sup> The “interminable debates” proceed.

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim draws a basic distinction between sacred and profane and argues that it underpins all of religious life because those

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 782-83.

<sup>88</sup> Emmet Kennedy, “‘Ideology’ from Destutt de Tracy to Marx,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40:3 (1979): 353-368.

<sup>89</sup> Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, VanAntwerpen, “Introduction,” 8.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Kennedy, 353-54.

things that are sacred must be kept apart.<sup>92</sup> In *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas extends Durkheim's framework, arguing that the distinction between clean and unclean structures all of social life because cleanliness is order and pollution is disorder.<sup>93</sup> Order, or cleanliness, requires the clarification of boundaries through a process of purification, which removes or abstains from that which is disordered and thus polluted. If one applies Douglas' theory to organized nonbelievers by way of a binaristic understanding of the secular/religious, perhaps nonbelievers would be averse to religion because they favor the "rational" and find it "irrational." Wanting secular order, they spurn religious disorder.

Throughout my fieldwork, however, I spoke to many organized nonbelievers who embrace the both/and of secular religiosity, despite its messiness. These are the groups that do not fit within the antagonistic frameworks offered by the existing sociology of nonbelief, and which I discuss at length chapter two of this dissertation.<sup>94</sup> One might ask, therefore, as Robert Yelle does of Mary Douglas, whether scholars of organized nonbelief are not themselves the ones who want to maintain order and avoid pollution.<sup>95</sup> Yelle argues that structuralists like Douglas inherit their semiotic ideology from Deism and older forms

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<sup>92</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995).

<sup>93</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (New York: Routledge, 1966).

<sup>94</sup> James Bielo makes a similar observation about emerging evangelicals in "Purity, Danger, and Rebellion: Notes on Urban Missional Evangelicals," *American Ethnologist* 38:2 (2011): 267-280. He argues that both Douglas and conservative evangelicals present quintessentially modern understandings of order and disorder. As he writes, "Emerging evangelicals are discontent with the purification efforts of their conservative brethren," and their blurring of boundaries if a form of dissent or resistance (279). In short, their disorder is an intentional rebellion against the ordering efforts of modernity.

<sup>95</sup> Robert A. Yelle, "Chapter 6: Arbitrariness, Anomaly, and Agency: A Critique of Mary Douglas's Structuralist Idea of the Holy," in *Semiotics of Religion: Signs of the Sacred in History* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 137-210.

of Protestantism that share “a bias against the supra-legal or disorderly dimensions of the Holy.”<sup>96</sup> In Yelle’s reading, nonbelievers are not necessarily afraid of disorder; rather, “it is our own fear of arbitrariness” that drives us to place them into neat binaries.<sup>97</sup> Once again, we find ourselves entangled.

Though Douglas’ theory fails to describe my ethnographic data, her vocabulary remains useful in its power to capture the visceral aversion that many nonbelievers feel toward the religious and their concomitant desire to purify the secular of religious pollution. Chapter one of this dissertation shows that organized nonbelievers become *de facto* religious studies scholars as they develop working definitions of the religious in an attempt to bound and remove pollutants from their speech, their bodies, and their communities. Those I interviewed did not talk about “purity,” though they would occasionally mention the “purely scientific,” the “purely rational,” or the “purely secular.” As I demonstrate in chapters one and three, those who understand the secular to exclude the religious construct a rigid boundary in order to keep the secular pure. Those who consider the secular to be like religion or coterminous with it do not ignore the distinction, however, but negotiate it in various ways that produce hybrid forms of the secular/religious.

Appropriating Douglas’ language also allows me to develop a theoretical approach in conversation with Bruno Latour’s diagnosis of the modern.<sup>98</sup> According to Latour, the modern entails two sets of practices: purification and translation. The “modern

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 210.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1993).

constitution,” as he calls it, demands innumerable separations, the first or primary being that between nature and culture, which parallels a separation between the nonhuman and the human.<sup>99</sup> The work of translation connects that which moderns have made separate. In this way, separation or purification is a precondition of translation because a gap must exist for it to be spanned. For Latour, purification and translation are two sides of the same coin; translation or mediation produces “hybrids,” which then must be purified. Purification produces separation, which must be mediated. The result is proliferation—discursive, but also material—as moderns purify in the name of accuracy and then invent new ways of relating that which they have made pure.<sup>100</sup> For Latour, purification, translation, and proliferation are not merely characteristics of modernity; they constitute it.

The anthropology of modernity that Latour prescribes and pioneers is a study of these processes of purification and translation at the sites of their performance. These are the arenas in which the modern is performed and thereby shaped. An anthropology of the modern constitution is thus also a study of the constitution of the modern.<sup>101</sup> Because Latour argues that this anthropology must study purification and translation “without using modern metaphysics as a vantage point,” he dedicates much of *We Have Never Been Modern* to developing a nonmodern perspective that is neither antimodern nor postmodern. For reasons that will become clear in the following section on entanglements, this dissertation eschews the secure authorial position offered by Latour’s nonmodern

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 10-12.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 12-15.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 15.

constitution and adapts his basic insights to describe how organized nonbelievers purify the secular of religious pollution and construct secular/religious hybrids alongside others who participate in the ongoing reconstruction of the secular.

### **Entangled in the Study of Secularism and Nonbelief**

In a lecture that Pierre Bourdieu gave at the French Association for the Sociology of Religion in Paris in December of 1982, he warned those in attendance of the need to separate themselves from that which they study: the religious field.<sup>102</sup> “[I]t is for each sociologist to ask,” he told them, “in the interest of their own research, when he speaks about religion, whether he wants to understand the struggles in which religious things are at stake, or to *take part* in these struggles.”<sup>103</sup> Those with an interest in the religious field belong to it: “Interest,” according to Bourdieu, “in its true sense, is what is important to me, what makes *differences* for me (which do not exist for an *indifferent* observer because *it is all the same* to him).”<sup>104</sup> A scientific sociology of religion—an objective sociology—requires pure indifference to religion. Further, this indifference cannot be an unstudied one; it must arise from intention, as an affected state, effecting an “epistemological break, [which] works through a social break, which itself supposes a (painful) objectivation of bonds and attachments.”<sup>105</sup> Even severing social ties might be insufficient because “words borrowed

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<sup>102</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Sociologists of Belief and Beliefs of Sociologists,” trans. Véronique Altglas and Matthew Wood, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 23:1 (2010): 1-7.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 2. Emphasis in original.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 3. Emphasis in original.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.



from religious language” could provide an unconscious vehicle for religious assumptions.<sup>106</sup>

A scientific sociology of religion can only be produced by a sociologist who has gone through a process of self-“objectivation,” *de facto* severing her relationship to the religious field by assuring that it *makes no difference*.

But does “objectivation” really require a break? Is such a break even possible? This lecture, in which Bourdieu appears at once so secular and so modern, offers an opportunity to recognize what is shared by much of the recent scholarship on secularism and Latour’s anthropology of modernity. For Latour, the postmodern is another turn within the modern, which attempts to escape from perpetually defective representations of materiality through a move to linguistic constructionism. Latour’s nonmodern constitution purports to offer a third way by negating neither the linguistic nor the material and giving reality to both, imagined as an actor-network of humans and objects all possessing agency. In short, he reconfigures the division that creates two assemblages, social and natural, and argues that this new framework provides a better understanding of the current world and its particular kind of complexity.<sup>107</sup> For Latour, this situation is both emergent and self-evident; it is the new now that requires new assemblages:

When we believed that we were modern, we could content ourselves with the assemblies of society and nature. But today we have to restudy what we are made of and extend the repertoire of ties and the number of associations way beyond the repertoire proposed by social explanations.<sup>108</sup>

Old universals are outmoded, so we need to break with them and make new ones.

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> See Bruno Latour, *Assembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 248.

But is Latour's nonmodern constitution really an end to the modern and postmodern cycles of severing and suturing—of purifying domains and then discovering that the boundary between them is blurry, and they are, in fact, connected? And does the mere acknowledgement that the secular and the religious are not separate truly elevate the scholar of secularism outside the bounds of secularity and disentangle her from the *interests* of the field and from the *interests* of knowledge production? Is she—*presto!*—now seated safely among the *etic*, gazing objectively at the *emic*? Despite Bourdieu's assertion that the difficult work of "epistemological vigilance" can bring the social scientist into an objective relation with her object of study, I remain skeptical.<sup>109</sup>

During her fieldwork among spiritual practitioners in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Courtney Bender observed that scholars who study spirituality are deeply entangled with those who practice it.<sup>110</sup> The researched often read the work of scholarly researchers, and they appropriate its theories and technical terms for their own ends. Bender and her informants have inherited many of the same influences, and their conversations with one another took place in a shared discursive space that could not be easily divided into *etic* and *emic*. As a researcher, she found herself "caught... in a web of relations."<sup>111</sup> This mutual entanglement shapes the construction of concepts like "spirituality," and Bender urges

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<sup>109</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus*, trans. Peter Collier (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988), xiii.

<sup>110</sup> Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 5-18.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

scholars to include entanglements as objects of their research.<sup>112</sup>

Returning to Taylor's work on the limits of representation and the Sisyphean task of semiotic inscription, studying these entanglements does not free the researcher from being knotted with the researched; it embraces the "not." Bender "nots" the distinction between etic and emic by demonstrating how social scientists and the subjects of their research constitute their shared discourse. Each side still depends on the distance and differences that distinguish them because the researcher needs a non-self to study, and in the case of my own work, nonbelievers rely on the authority of scholars to support the ways they use language, interpret data, and make arguments. These sides constitute one another in both sameness and difference, which is an ongoing process of reconstruction that is necessary for the work of each, but not inherent in them. The turn in attention to the secular, the questioning of its assumed separation from the religious, and the continued need for "objectivation" or etic distinction have produced an auto-catalytic reaction among scholars of the secular who must now establish a difference not only with the religious, but also its opposite. Being caught in this neither/nor has spurred the proliferation of secular formations no less than being caught in the either/or of secular/religious has spurred nonbelievers to create new organizations, labels, and ideologies.

Though he does not turn his attention to his own caughtness, Asad offers sound advice for approaching the secular given its pervasiveness and slippery ontological boundaries. Rather than "determine the essential meaning of 'the secular,'" he proposes "a

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<sup>112</sup> Courtney Bender, "Things in Their Entanglements," in *The Post-Secular in Question*, ed. Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 67.

more modest endeavor: An inquiry into what is involved when 'the secular' is invoked—who tries to define it, in what context, how, and why.”<sup>113</sup> Cady and Hurd concur: “[O]ne must track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being secular are made.”<sup>114</sup> Agreeing to this task requires scholars of the secular to track their own production in addition to that of the secular other. Though they differ in the formations they construct, nonbelievers and social scientists are both engaged in a secular *poiēsis*.<sup>115</sup>

Writing in the *Genealogy of Morals*, Friedrich Nietzsche describes the caughtness of the researcher in the production of knowledge, though he offers no exteriorized “objective.” In lieu, there is only the warp and woof of many subjective threads:

Henceforth, my dear philosophers, let us be on guard against the dangerous old conceptual fiction that posited a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knowing subject”; let us guard against the snares of such contradictory concepts as “pure reason,” “absolute spirituality,” “knowledge in itself”: these always demand that we should think of an eye that is completely unthinkable, an eye turned in no particular direction, in which the active and interpreting forces, through which alone seeing becomes seeing *something*, are supposed to be lacking; these always demand of the eye an absurdity and a nonsense. There is *only* a perspective seeing, *only* a perspective “knowing”; and the *more* affects we allow to speak about one thing, the *more* eyes, different eyes, we can use to observe one thing, the more complete will our “concept” of this thing, our “objectivity,” be.<sup>116</sup>

The path this dissertation follows is one circuit through a richly textured fabric of secular

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<sup>113</sup> Talal Asad, “Thinking about the Secular Body, Pain, and Liberal Politics,” *Cultural Anthropology* 26:4 (2011): 673.

<sup>114</sup> Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, eds., *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 12.

<sup>115</sup> On ethnography (and science) as poetics, see James Clifford and George E. Marcus, eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California, 1986), and especially the eds.’ introduction. On *poiēsis* as world-making, see Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt, (Garland Publishing, Inc.: New York, 1977), 3-35.

<sup>116</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 119. Emphasis in original.

formations. Rather than attempt to extricate itself, it observes the entanglement of organized nonbelievers, the social science of nonbelief, and the scholarly study of secularism as its own kind of formation in which it, too, plays a role.

### **Summary: Surveying the Landscape and Studying Cases**

This dissertation's primary contributions are to the social scientific study of nonbelievers, the discipline of religious studies, and the theoretical study of the secular, though it also contributes to the emerging subfield at the intersection of religious studies, sociology, and legal studies. Chapters one and two survey the landscape of organized nonbelievers in the United States, including religious nontheists who are mentioned but otherwise unaccounted for in the recent social scientific literature.<sup>117</sup> The central aim of these chapters is to present the variety of ways that one can be secular in the United States, to show where those ways have come from and how they have evolved in relation to one another, and to demonstrate the tremendous labor that nonbelievers undertake to create various forms of a "pure" secular and hybrid forms of the secular/religious. In doing so, these chapters situate nonbelievers within, alongside, and against American religion, and make the case for their inclusion in the historical and contemporary narratives of American religious life.

Chapter one focuses on groups that want to purify themselves of religion as much as

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<sup>117</sup> See, for instance, Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening* (2014). For older studies that account far better for religious nontheists, see Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (1971); Demerath, "Spitting Against the Wind" (1969); and Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850-1960* (London: Henemann Education Books, 1977).

possible and shows how they develop working definitions to decide which ways of speaking, behaving, and belonging are too religious or sufficiently secular. This chapter contributes to the study of nonbelief and nonreligion by demonstrating that atheists and other nonbelievers are not inherently opposed to religion because “religion” is far more than just belief. Though this observation may seem obvious to religious studies scholars and theorists of the secular, social scientists of nonbelief and those who write about them in the mainstream media frequently equate atheists, the “nonreligious,” and even the religious “nones.”

My analysis separates religion into belief, belonging, and behavior, and it also identifies particular aspects of these categories to which many nonbelievers are averse, i.e., authority, dogma, groupthink, ritual, practice, and evangelizing. By providing a clear vocabulary and framework for describing the ways in which nonbelievers pick and choose among the aspects of religion that they consider pollution, I provide an elegant way for scholars to describe the variety they encounter in the landscape of organized nonbelief. Further, by emphasizing the diverse ways in which nonbelievers imagine the boundary between the secular and the religious, I demonstrate how their “choices” are often not choices at all, but outcomes of the logics that have patterned their understanding of the religious field.

Chapter two focuses on organizations that create secular/religious hybrids and locates the origins of nonbelief in Comte’s Religion of Humanity, the nineteenth-century freethought movement, Unitarianism, and Reform Judaism. By demonstrating the religious origins of several of America’s nonbeliever organizations and movements, this chapter

shows how nonbelievers sometimes emphasize their religious origins and sometimes ignore them altogether. Because all of the groups that I include in my study participate in the American secular movement and belong to national organizations like the Secular Coalition for America and the Openly Secular Coalition, they are all actively “secular.” For this reason, I consider those groups and individuals that call themselves religious to be secular/religious “hybrids.” Those that produce these admixtures do so carefully, according to their particular ways of imagining the boundary between secular and religious. The Ethical Culture movement, for instance, is nontheistic but avowedly religious, and the Council for Secular Humanism is not religious, but it sometimes draws on religion analogically to create secular substitutes for religious functions.

By demonstrating the internal diversity of the secular I seek to undermine models of American religious life that imagine it on a spectrum bound by secular and religious extremes. Scholars who offer binaristic narratives of American religiosity perpetuate the antagonism of the “culture wars” story and produce a secular formation that resembles that of activists who want to purify the secular of its religious pollution. They also fail to recognize the nature of the current sea change in American religion, most clearly evidenced in the growing proportion of Americans who remain “religious” but no longer fit within demographers’ categories of religious belonging. Nonbelievers should be studied alongside and in relation to religious groups, but they should not be considered an extreme, a pole, or an opposite. Their position in the religious field is rhizomatic.<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>118</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

The dissertation's third chapter compares three recent lawsuits brought by three separate nonbeliever organizations, each of which asks the courts to understand it differently. In one suit, the Freedom From Religion Foundation wants to avoid being called religious and wants the courts to stop treating religion as special. In another suit, the American Humanist Association wants to be considered a religious minority and protected against discrimination. By demanding that the courts include them in their working definition of religion, the group undermines the exclusivity of religion's specialness by demanding it become more capacious. In a third suit, the Center for Inquiry does not want to be called religious, but it wants its clergy-like celebrants to be treated like religion for the purpose of performing weddings. This group wants to purify itself analogically, and it demands that the courts sanction that analogic purification while still providing it religious benefits.

The central argument in this chapter is that secular Americans face an ontological challenge when trying to be secular but not religious because the state's working definitions of religion are capacious enough to include them and often do. This chapter contributes to religious studies by demonstrating how organized nonbelievers increasingly fit within the pantheon of American religious pluralism. The secular is being religionized and pluralized as disparate groups like American Atheists and the American Ethical Union work together to create a secular identity and receive recognition alongside minority religions. Their role in the evolution of a second-order category like pluralism provides yet another reason they should be include in the study of American religion. Finally, this



chapter contributes to the emerging subfield on religious freedom and the specialness of religion emerging at the intersection of religious studies, sociology, and legal studies.

The dissertation's fourth chapter centers on a single event: the first-ever Congressional briefing organized by the secular lobby. The scholars, secular lobbyists, and Congressional staff members who attended the event were often talking past one other and confused by the various meanings of the secular and secularism. Reading this event closely, I distinguish among the various ways in which participants employed these terms, and I focus on how activists use their polysemy to simultaneously build coalitions with religious groups and rally their nontheistic base. Because the meeting gathered activists, scholars, and state officials, it also provides an opportunity to demonstrate how various groups produce versions of the secular that sometimes contradict.

This chapter contributes to the study of organized nonbelievers by offering the first analysis of their efforts to lobby Congress, and it contributes to the study of the secular by distinguishing meanings that scholars often elide when creating grand genealogies or relating disparate people, places, and events through the heuristic of secularism. This chapter also underscores one of the central arguments of this dissertation: organized nonbelievers, secular activists, scholars, judges, IRS bureaucrats, and elected officials are all entangled in making the American secular.

## **CHAPTER 1:** **Religious Pollution**

Early on a Sunday afternoon, on a crisp April day, I sat in the parlor of a large brick house in a suburb of New York City. Standing far back from the road, the house was surrounded by acres of bare trees and dead grass, still waiting for the warmth of spring. A slice of cake in my lap and a mug of coffee in my hand, I chatted with a group of men and women whom I had only just met. We made small talk, and I prefaced our conversation by telling them about my research and the reason for my visit. They were warm and welcoming, and they seemed as curious about me as I was about them. Preferring muted colors and the comfort of sneakers, there was little hint of ostentation in the way they were dressed. I would later learn that they were an accomplished group, comprising doctors, chemists, artists, musicians, psychiatrists, and professors, several of whom had recently retired. When Sunday School ended, children streamed up from the basement and weaved among the standing adults. As they passed, I tucked my mug safely between my heels and took a bite of cake.

For the previous hour and a half around forty of us had sat in rows of folding chairs in a room on the opposite side of the house. We had attended a program that included music, discussion, and quiet contemplation, as well as a “Platform,” or prepared speech, entitled “Faith for Faithless Times.” The Platform was a jeremiad for a society in peril and offered us deliverance from the consumerism and hedonism that dominate our culture. “I assume that at least some of you have joined a community here, and not necessarily a religion,” the speaker told us. “I’m here to press the point that this Society is part of a religion—with a philosophy.” Attending services on Sundays is not enough, he implored. In

order to save ourselves and the world, we need to embrace the philosophy this religion offers, and we need to live according to its vision.

Religion can also be dangerous, he warned us: “I offer religion as the problem. [...] It’s one of the mental blocks causing the trouble.” “Traditional religion,” as he sometimes called it, “failed” to see humans for what they really are, embedded “in an inter-relational web of minds.” While “Religion sees humans as part of God’s creation,” he prefers “science,” which “sees humans as part of nature.” To the uninitiated, his use of the word “religion” might appear full of contradictions. “Rather than being diplomatic and nice,” he told us, “I think it’s time, at least among ourselves, to admit that organized religion, as distinct from us, which is disorganized religion”—and here he had to pause for laughter—“Organized religion has reached its limit at making human beings a better people.” He continued:

Since making people good is supposedly one of the primary excuses for the existence of any particular religion, it’s time to unpack more energetically our radically different approach to religion and offer it more definitely as not merely an alternative, but as a replacement for the failed religions that continue to play a part in screwing up our world and screwing up humankind.

Religion should help people be good, but often, it does the opposite. The “God idea,” as he called it, “spreads through culture and hurts mankind.” By contrast, “Ethical humanist religion” offers “a way out of that mentality.” Ethical Culture offers a religion that is an alternative to religion.

Rather than resolve this seeming contradiction, Ethical Culture often nurtures it.<sup>119</sup>

In several conversations I had with Ethical humanists, they disparaged religion as a

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<sup>119</sup> For more on hybridity as “productive tension,” see Fiona Murray, “The Oncomouse That Roared: Hybrid Exchange Strategies as a Source of Distinction at the Boundary of Overlapping Institutions,” *American Journal of Sociology* 116:2 (September 2010): 341-388.

delusion and proudly called themselves religious within the span of a few minutes. A man I met from the Ethical Society in Washington D.C. explained his dual identity—as both religious and not—by saying he is wearing his “other hat” when he gets angry about religion. Though not all members of Ethical Culture consider themselves “religious,” and though not all have negative opinions about “religion,” all of those with whom I spoke reflected critically on these labels and self-consciously positioned themselves with respect to them. In many conversations, only context indicated whether religion was the good kind or the bad kind: one is religious, but not *religious*; one is part of a religion, but not *religion*.

Members of Ethical Culture are not the only ones struggling for words. All of America’s organized nonbelievers face the challenge of finding terms that capture what they believe and how they live. Scholars face this challenge, as well, and I am no different.<sup>120</sup> By “nonbeliever” I mean an ellipsis: a person who lacks belief in God, gods, or the supernatural. Organized nonbelievers are those who organize *qua* nonbelievers. Not all of those whom I study would consider themselves nonbelievers because some prefer to avoid any negative terminology. Instead they describe themselves with labels like humanist and freethinker. No one term describes all of those who comprise America’s network of secular activists. Most identify with several labels, which can also include nontheist, agnostic, naturalist, or rationalist. “Nonbelievers” is an efficacious umbrella category and

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<sup>120</sup> For recent debates, see Ryan T. Cragun and Joseph H. Hammer, “One Person’s Apostate is Another Person’s Convert”: What Terminology Tells Us About Pro-Religious Hegemony in the Sociology of Religion,” *Humanity & Society* 35.1/2 (Feb-May 2011): 149-175; Lois Lee, “Research Note: Talking About a Revolution: Terminology for the New Field of Non-religion Studies,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27:1 (2012): 129-139. For a large-scale survey that divides nonbelievers into six types, see Christopher Frank Silver, “Atheism, Agnosticism, and Nonbelief: A qualitative and Quantitative Study of Type and Narrative” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, 2013).

necessarily an imperfect one.

The labels nonbelievers use to describe themselves can divide or unify depending on who uses them, how, and when. Disagreements about these labels and how they fit within a constellation of other terms spur the proliferation of still more labels, and along with them, new organizations. One of the aims of this dissertation is to argue that organized nonbelievers' ongoing debates over how to describe themselves erase any stable point of reference, and a scholar's adoption of a certain label necessarily situates that scholar within existing debates. By describing the debates and the shifting boundaries upon which they depend, I show what is at stake when calling something secular or religious and situate myself and other scholars within existing practices of boundary construction.

This chapter and the next explain how the ongoing reconstruction of boundaries produces a variety of ways to be secular. These chapters also explain why some of America's organized nonbelievers call themselves religious, while others want nothing to do with religion and try to remove it from all aspects of their lives. If one thinks the secular should be pure of the religious, then how one defines religion and the degree to which one is allergic to it become the criteria for defining the secular. While some nonbeliever groups attempt radical purification of the secular, others create self-consciously hybrid forms of secular religion. Religious humanists observe boundaries that delineate what is *too religious* and therefore the bad kind of religion. The numerous ways in which the secular and the religious can appear adjacent, isomorphic, or overlapping become points of contentious debate among nonbelievers and help to reify the boundaries between particular groups. As they debate what counts as religious pollution, nonbelievers develop

particular ways of thinking, speaking, and being secular, which in turn, shape the structures and activities of the groups they form. For some, being secular means avoiding groups altogether.

How nonbelievers imagine religious pollution affects how they structure their shared frameworks. Though it is possible that some nonbelievers have no aversion to religion, all of the organized nonbelievers whom I interviewed have a working understanding of the beliefs and behaviors that they avoid because they are too religious or the wrong kind of religious. Close analysis of interviews, conversations, talks, and other presentations, as well as books, articles, and blog posts, point to five kinds of religious pollution that organized nonbelievers debate: 1) believing and belonging; 2) authority and dogma; 3) groupthink; 4) ritual and practice; and 5) evangelizing. Though each form of pollution depends on the others in order to hang together and undergird a shifting framework of boundaries, the sections that follow treat them separately.

### **1. The Dangers of Believing and Belonging**

Because my research focuses on the leaders and members of nonbeliever organizations, none of those whom I interviewed, with the exception of religious humanists, thought that joining one of these groups made them any less secular. Yet in talking about my research with colleagues, friends, and acquaintances, I often hear that nonbeliever organizations seem like a contradiction in terms. Political commentator and self-described atheist Michael Luciano offered a common view when he was quoted in an Associated Press article re-published on numerous news websites: "The idea that you're

building an entire organization based on what you don't believe, to me, sounds like an offense against sensibility.”<sup>121</sup> In an article that Luciano later wrote for the website PolicyMic, where he is the National Politics Editor, he qualified his position only slightly: “If atheism is to be organized at all, it should be for the purpose of repelling religious infringements on secular society and little if anything else.”<sup>122</sup> Read together, and read closely, Luciano’s misgivings about nonbeliever groups reveal three perspectives about the relationship between believing and belonging that influence how and whether nonbelievers organize: 1) nonbelievers cannot organize because they do not share any beliefs; 2) nonbelievers can organize if they share an opposition to religion; 3) nonbelievers share a belief system and can organize into like-minded communities.

In the first quote, Luciano echoes many who see atheism, agnosticism, and other forms of nonbelief as solely negative. Nonbelievers share no beliefs because they are defined only by their lack of belief in God, gods, or the supernatural. Indeed, this is the basic definition of “nonbelievers” that I offered above, though the purpose of this chapter is to show that this definition is merely one among many contested understandings. Luciano assumes that those coming together must hold some beliefs in common, and as nonbelievers inherently do not, their organization is “an offense against sensibility.” His argument echoes a distinction that atheist philosophers Antony Flew and Michael Martin make between negative and positive atheism, where negative atheism is the mere absence

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<sup>121</sup> Gillian Flaccus, “Atheist ‘Mega-Churches’ Take Root Across US, World,” *National Public Radio*, November 10, 2013,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=244359792>.

<sup>122</sup> Michael Luciano, “Sunday Assembly Atheist Church is a Foolish Idea,” *Policy Mic*, November 13, 2013, <http://www.policymic.com/articles/73339/sunday-assembly-atheist-church-is-a-foolish-idea>

of theism, and positive atheism asserts that theism is false.<sup>123</sup> Luciano defines atheism only in the negative sense and avoids positive atheism by refusing to acknowledge its possibility. Nonbelievers cannot organize because they do not share beliefs.

Luciano's second statement qualifies his AP quote in a careful way that sheds light on his anxiety about organizing around positive atheism: nonbelievers do not share any beliefs—even a belief that theism is false—but they *can* share their opposition to “religious infringements on secular society.” Opposition can be a sufficient condition for organization if it is not a shared, positive belief concerning the theological. Atheists who organize as defenders of secular society, contra specific infringements, are an issue-based voluntary association. They are secular because they do not organize around a shared claim to theological truth.

In Luciano's article, the source of his second statement, he explains further why he wants to avoid positive atheism: “Quite simply, [atheism] is the lack of belief in deities. Atheism is *not*, contrary to popular belief, the assertion that there is no god or gods. It is not a belief system.”<sup>124</sup> By arguing that there is only negative atheism, Luciano forecloses the possibility that it could be a system of theological beliefs, and by extension religious. Seemingly small-stakes claims about whether atheism is positive or negative are significant

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<sup>123</sup> Antony Flew, *God, Freedom, and Immortality* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1984), 13-30. Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Boston: Temple University Press, 1990), 281. For a criticism of this distinction, see Anthony Kenny, *Faith and Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). A century earlier, John Stuart Mill drew a similar distinction between positive and negative atheism, where the former is “the dogmatic denial of his existence,” and the latter is “the denial that there is any evidence on either side, which for most practical purposes amounts to the same thing as if the existence of a God had been disproved.” Mill, “Theism,” *Three Essays on Religion*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (London: Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1874), 242.

<sup>124</sup> Luciano, “Sunday Assembly Atheist Church is a Foolish Idea.”



for nonbelievers like Luciano who want to avoid the slippery slope to religion—as a belief system and as an organization of like-minded believers. He does not want there to be an organized religion of atheism, and as will become evident throughout this chapter, Luciano and others like him have a very specific understanding what religion is.

The article that quotes Luciano and the follow-up article that he wrote for *PolicyMic* are about the Sunday Assembly, a London-based “godless congregation” that has inspired dozens of imitators throughout the world. Founded in January of 2013 by comedians Sanderson Jones and Pippa Evans, the Sunday Assembly is an earnest attempt to salvage “all the good bits of religion,” as Jones says often. While Jones and Evans were visiting the New York City Sunday Assembly in November of 2013 as part of their 40 Dates in 40 Nights church planting tour, Jones justified their godless approach to religion with a metaphor: If you have a pebble in your shoe, you don’t throw out the shoe; you remove it.<sup>125</sup>

Luciano and Jones represent two radically different approaches that nonbelievers adopt toward the relationship between the secular and the religious. For Luciano, even positive atheism risks becoming too much like religion if it functions as a system of theological beliefs and if that system is the basis for belonging to an organization. Though he is the National Politics Editor at a political magazine, Luciano does not warn against political parties and other groups in which members share positive beliefs. His anxiety extends only to *theological* beliefs—even ones that claim there is no *theos*. In his view, they should not be the basis for belonging if one is really a nonbeliever.

By contrast, Jones emphasizes that all are welcome at the Sunday Assembly,

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<sup>125</sup> See “40 Dates and 40 Nights,” *The Sunday Assembly*, <http://sundayassembly.com/40dates/>, retrieved on December 28, 2013.

regardless of their beliefs, theistic or non-. The good parts of religion, it seems, are getting together to sing, to sit in silence, to celebrate life, and to feel that one is part of a community. Luciano and Jones differ in the ways they imagine religion and its relationship to the secular. For Luciano, religion is a system of beliefs or claims about the existence of God, gods, or the supernatural. To organize around the lack of belief in those claims is nonsensical at best. At worst, it is turning nonbelief into a religion and making it into something that it neither is nor should be. The secular and the religious are mutually exclusive in this framework, and as one often finds in the language of those who advocate for such a separation, Luciano relies on a spatial description of “religious *infringements* on secular society.”<sup>126</sup> For Jones, religion is shared practice and belonging. No matter what one believes or does not believe, one can participate in his form of religion. Given that the aim of the Sunday Assembly is an admixture of secular and religious people and practices, neither Jones nor Evans view them as separate domains, nor do they seek to prevent the one from infringing upon the other.

## **2. The Dangers of Authority and Dogma**

Luciano and the Sunday Assembly represent extremes. Though these extremes can provide a framework for understanding the concerns of organized nonbelievers, the debates among the leaders and members of America’s nonbeliever organizations are complex and driven by still other understandings of religion and its relationship to the secular. For instance, at the national level, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF)

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<sup>126</sup> Emphasis mine.

is a group that Luciano would commend for its opposition to religion. The organization's co-founder, Ann Nicol Gaylor, was a trusted leader in Madalyn Murray O'Hair's organization, American Atheists, before O'Hair and Gaylor parted acrimoniously. (By all accounts I gathered from those who knew O'Hair, she was a difficult person who did not want to partner with other organizations and who often questioned the loyalty of those who helped her run her group.)<sup>127</sup> Gaylor and her daughter founded FFRF in Madison, Wisconsin in 1976 following their departure from American Atheists. FFRF has become the country's most litigious nonbeliever organization and dedicates a great deal of its resources to sending letters threatening legal action and pursuing lawsuits against violations of the separation of church and state. In 2012, FFRF sent more than nine hundred letters of complaint and received more than two thousand requests for its assistance. As of December 2013, FFRF is involved in fourteen ongoing lawsuits in courts throughout the country.<sup>128</sup>

Though its stated mission is "to promote the constitutional principle of separation of state and church, and to educate the public on matters relating to nontheism [sic]," FFRF also has seventeen local chapters, which function as communities for members of the national organization.<sup>129</sup> These chapters are located in cities like Grand Rapids, Louisville,

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<sup>127</sup> For more on O'Hair and American Atheists, and specifically on Gaylor's involvement with the organization, see Bryan Le Beau, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 283-285. Gaylor is also quoted regarding O'Hair in a *Time* magazine article from 1997; David Van Biema and Simon Robinson, "Where's Madalyn?" *Time*, February 10, 1997, Vol. 149, Issue 6.

<sup>128</sup> FFRF maintains a detailed online archive of its legal accomplishments, including conflicts resolved through letters of complaint: <http://ffrf.org/legal/archives/>.

<sup>129</sup> "Chapters," *Freedom From Religion Foundation*, available at <http://ffrf.org/get-involved/ffrf-chapters> (accessed December 28, 2013).

and Colorado Springs, and some are also affiliated with other national organizations like the American Humanist Association and the Center for Inquiry. Among the national nonbeliever organizations, FFRF is the only one that requires all members of local chapters to pay national dues, which also allows it to accurately count its local members as part of its overall membership. In December of 2012, one of FFRF's leaders told me it was "the largest expressly atheist and agnostic organization in the country," with more than nineteen thousand total members—nearly four times the five thousand members it had in 2004.

FFRF's growing number of local communities, organized under a dues-collecting umbrella organization, makes the group's leaders both proud and a little uncomfortable. During an interview over lunch near the organization's offices in Madison, a leader named Bill sought to clarify how FFRF understands itself and its relationship to its local chapters:

We don't view ourselves like religions view themselves, as trying to convert the world or make the world in our image. We're there for people who already don't believe. Not like a religious movement who's trying to proselytize and gain converts and set up churches and dioceses all over the world. Although we are getting more requests for chapters, which is interesting. We've never been big on chapters, but we have it in our bylaws, and we have some wonderful chapters. Our attitude toward the chapters is that they should be as autonomous as possible and as local as possible, with a minimum amount of us. Partly because we don't have the time, really. The only chapters that should exist are the ones that can't help it. It's a local group of people that just spontaneously, organically, just can't help forming a group. And that's cool. It's not like we're making it happen. They'll come to us and say, "How can we be a chapter?"

Bill associates belonging with religion, and he also worries about authority. The chain of Bill's thought reveals that as he was talking, he recognized that FFRF's hierarchy resembles certain religious hierarchies ("churches and dioceses")—though of course it also resembles

countless secular organizations that sociologists would call “voluntary associations.”<sup>130</sup> To make clear that his organization’s activities are wholly secular, Bill insisted that these groups organize “spontaneously, organically,” and that they approach the national organization and not the other way around. Words like “autonomous” and “local” minimize FFRF’s authority and distance it from Bill’s understanding of clerical authority.

Communities that mediate between FFRF’s members and the national organization are hybrid forms that bear a close enough resemblance to religious congregations that they require purification—at least for someone as allergic to religion as Bill.

Bill’s concern with authority points to a set of binaries that underpin how he understands the boundary between the secular and the religious. Though FFRF’s legal efforts arguably make it the national nonbeliever organization most interested in maintaining that boundary, Bill does not agree with Luciano that nonbelievers cannot organize into communities. What remains important for Bill, however, is that local groups maintain their autonomy because belonging raises the specter of religious control, authority, and submission. According to the working definition that prevails among organized nonbelievers, religion—or at least the bad kind—means sacrificing autonomy and critical rationality by submitting to “dogma” and religious “authority.” These concerns are not specific to Bill and are common among nonbelievers in the anglophone world.

Writing in support of humanism and against religion, British philosopher A.C. Grayling

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<sup>130</sup> See N.J. Demerath, Peter Dobkin Hall, Terry Schmitt, and Rhys H. Williams, eds., *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998). D. Scott Cormode’s chapter is especially relevant: “Does Institutional Isomorphism Imply Secularization?: Churches and Secular Voluntary Associations in the Turn-of-the-Century City,” 116-131.

emphasizes the same point: “There are very few sources of conflict and mental enslavement as bad as an ideology which demands self-abnegation by submission to its dogmas and to the self-appointed interpreters of its dogmas. Religion is the paradigm of this.”<sup>131</sup> Grayling’s language depicts a battle for the mind in which religious authority and dogma pose serious dangers to individual autonomy.

All of the labels with which nonbelievers describe themselves hint at their views of religion, though even these connotations are flexible depending on the context.

“Freethought” is a term that nonbelievers often use to express their opposition to dogmatism and to emphasize their autonomy and rationality. Since 1984, FFRF has published a newsletter entitled *Freethought Today*, and the organization’s leaders see “freethought” and “freethinking” as central to its mission. Freethought first became an intellectual and social movement in the United States in the nineteenth century, and one leader at FFRF credited her organization with reviving the term in the twentieth: “We popularized the term [freethinker]. [...] I think FFRF is responsible for bringing that back into the lexicon.”<sup>132</sup> One of FFRF’s co-founders and its current co-president, Annie Laurie Gaylor, also published a volume of writings by “women freethinkers” in 1997, making it a precursor to Susan Jacoby’s more widely known 2004 history of the American freethought

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<sup>131</sup> A.C. Grayling, *The God Argument: The Case Against Religion and for Humanism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 16.

<sup>132</sup> See Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America: 1825-1850* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943). Sidney Warren, *American Freethought: 1860-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943). Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004).

movement, *Freethinkers*.<sup>133</sup>

The differences between how organizations like FFRF and avowed freethinkers like Jacoby understand “freethought” demonstrates its flexibility as a category that cuts across factions. The range of its use also reveals a shared antipathy for clerical authority and religious dogma among organized nonbelievers. In the 2011 announcement for its annual scholarship essay contest, FFRF asked applicants to “Describe a Moment that Made You Proud to be a Freethinker (Atheist/Agnostic/Nonbeliever)” and quoted a dictionary definition as “one who forms his or her opinion about religion based on reason rather than faith, tradition or authority.”<sup>134</sup> FFRF’s Greater Sacramento Chapter offers a similar definition on their subpage of the national organization’s website: “We are freethinkers: people who form opinions about religion and spirituality independent of tradition, authority or established belief, in favor of rational inquiry.”<sup>135</sup> These definitions consider “faith” and “established belief” antithetical to autonomy and rationality, and they show how FFRF and like-minded nonbelievers imagine the dangers posed by clerical authority and religious dogma. They also shed light on Bill’s desire to make clear that FFRF’s local chapters are spontaneous, organic, autonomous, and local; their secularity depends on it.

This understanding of freethought, which emphasizes individual autonomy and rationality, as well as freedom from dogma and authority, is common among organized

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<sup>133</sup> Annie Laurie Gaylor, ed., *Women Without Superstition: "No Gods—No masters": The Collected Writings of Women Freethinkers of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Madison, Wis.: Freedom From Religion Foundation, 1997).

<sup>134</sup> “Tell Us Why You're a Freethinker,” *Freethought Today*, March 1, 2011, 5. The prompt does not cite the dictionary source.

<sup>135</sup> “Greater Sacramento FFRF Chapter,” *Freedom From Religion Foundation*, <http://ffrf.org/greater-sacramento-ffrf-chapter>.

nonbelievers. The executive director of one of the smaller national organizations described his “average member” as “a freethinking person, generally—a non-joiner, individualist, seeker.” A speaker at a symposium I attended on African American humanism offered a particularly succinct definition: “Thought free of religious dogma.” And another leader who founded an organization that encourages nonbelievers to give to charity described freethinking as “being independent of an organized authority.” A prominent donor and organizer who favors the term “freethinker” quipped, “If we have any dogma, it’s that there is no dogma.” He also warned that “when you have no doubt and don’t question, you risk becoming a fundamentalist and blowing up planes.” In his framework, freethought is an antidote to religious dogmatism. Doubt and freethinking are active and necessary means of purifying oneself of religious pollution.

Even leaders who do not favor the term “freethinker” describe themselves and their organizations in much the same way. According to a prominent leader named Rich who identifies primarily as a secular humanist, freethinker is “the old-time term.” Yet he also told me that his organization “believes strongly in individual autonomy,” “rejects religious dogma as a source of ethics,” and seeks “to remove any influence of dogma or religion on public policy.” Rich emphasized that at the individual level, members of his organization describe themselves using a range of terms, including atheist, agnostic, and humanist. Though disagreements over labels remain common, leaders like Rich have chosen a big-tent approach that minimizes differences.

“Freethinkers” is especially useful for cutting across divisions among nonbelievers, owing, in part, to its “old-time” capacious meaning. Susan Jacoby pays careful attention to



how her nineteenth-century sources use the term, and her definition in *Freethinkers* is worth quoting at length:

Often defined as a total absence of faith in God, freethought can better be understood as a phenomenon running the gamut from the truly antireligious—those who regarded all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence in every aspect of society—to those who adhered to a private, unconventional faith revering some form of God or Providence but at odds with orthodox religious authority. American freethinkers have included deists, who, like many of the founding fathers, believed in a “watchmaker God” who set the universe in motion but subsequently took no active role in the affairs of men; agnostics; and unabashed atheists.<sup>136</sup>

Historian Sidney Warren agrees: “Freethinkers in the United States were hardly a closely knit group in an ideological sense.”<sup>137</sup>

Jacoby’s definition is accurate for the nineteenth century, but it strains to capture the twentieth and twenty-first century usage of the term. The Freedom From Religion Foundation makes clear in its very name its opposition to religion, and for most of the nonbelievers with whom I spoke, “freethought” is a synonym for nonbelief, and the so-called “freethought” or “secular” movement is the context in which they first encountered it. To put the point briefly, no one I spoke to imagines today’s “freethinkers” to be spiritualists or Emersonian religious liberals, though this sense was alive and well in the second half of the long nineteenth century. That “freethinker” once meant something much more inclusive has, however, allowed leaders to use “freethinkers” as an umbrella category that incorporates the disputed margins of American nonbelief.

Greg, a nontheistic religious humanist who is a member of the Unitarian Universalist (UU) Church, uses “freethinking” and “freethinker” in uniquely inclusive ways. Though he is

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<sup>136</sup> Jacoby, *Freethinkers*, 4.

<sup>137</sup> Sidney Warren, *American Freethought*, 30.

part of a denomination with strong Christian roots, the Unitarian Universalist Association does not require its members to adhere to a Christian creed and openly accepts those who identify with other traditions.<sup>138</sup> Greg is part of a national network of secular activists, and his organization, the UU Humanists, participates with other nontheistic groups in the Secular Coalition for America, a secular lobbying organization founded in 2002. As a religious humanist, he fits awkwardly at times within an activist movement that still debates the distinction between religious and secular humanism. A range of phrases using “freethinker” allows him to cut across the religious/secular divide while continuing to emphasize the values of individual autonomy and critical rationality. In our conversation over lunch, he used a range of phrases that link humanism (both religious and secular) with atheism, nonbelief, and the “freethinker movement,” e.g., “local humanist freethought groups,” “humanistic freethinking,” “freethinking and nonbelief,” “freethinking groups, religious or secular,” “freethinker atheist groups,” “the secular movement, or the freethinker movement.”

Greg still draws a distinction between his religious worldview and that of other religions. Near the end of our conversation, I asked him outright whether and how he imagines the difference: “Why would the humanist worldview be less of a worldview, a

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<sup>138</sup> On the importance of individualism and “free-thinking” in Unitarian Universalism, see Lori E. Leitgeb, “Building Theology, Reinscribing Subjectivity: Cultivating Liberal Identity in Unitarian Universalism” (PhD diss., SUNY-Buffalo, 2009) and Katrina C. Hoop, “Being A Community Of Individuals: Collective Identity And Rhetorical Strategies In A Unitarian Universalist Church,” *International Review of Modern Sociology* 38:1 (2012): 105-130. Leitgeb relies on Foucault, Asad, and Connolly, to characterize subjectivity formation among members of UU: “Unitarian Universalism relies on these discourses of individualism, personal sovereignty, freedom of belief, and the process of evaluating truth claims through properly educated senses of reason.” (7) On creed aversion and the concern over “creeping creedalism” among UU members, see Leitgeb, 33-39, 103-128.

position, than the Christian worldview or the Jewish worldview?"<sup>139</sup> His response reveals how he constructs the boundary between good and bad kinds of religion and the challenge he faces in considering himself both religious and secular:

I don't think it is [like other religious worldviews]. In fact, I think it's got a dimension to it that other worldviews don't have. The primary defining characteristic of humanism is its monistic approach to reality. We really don't accept anything other than the reality we experience. We may not understand, and maybe some of it we'll never understand, but there's only one reality, and we're an integral part of it. There isn't another reality that created this reality. There isn't some other authority, some other entity, other than... the natural is super enough. We don't need the supernatural. So I think the fundamental thing is not whether you believe in God, because you can define monistically that God is everything there is, then you've got that problem there. What is important is that our life-stance says that we are part of, evolutionarily, the last bud on an evolutionary tree. We are responsible for ourselves and what we do, our conditions. That life-stance gives us not only freedom, but a complementary sense of responsibility that the other life-stances don't have. God's gonna take care of it; we're just pilgrims passing through—that's an irresponsible way to look at it, and that's why we're destroying the planet. Because we don't feel a sense of responsibility for being the universe becoming conscious of itself. Which is what we are. So I think it's a life-stance. It has to do with living and not what happens before living or beyond living.

Greg explains his monistic cosmology by saying that there is only one world—the natural one—and gives a progressive understanding of evolution in which humans are the most developed animals. More importantly for the present discussion, Greg explains that his worldview differs from that of other religious worldviews because it does not demand obedience to an authority outside the individual, emphasizing autonomy, and by extension,

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<sup>139</sup> Anthropologist Matthew Engelke has put a similar challenge to philosopher Philip Kitcher in his review of Kitcher's *Life After Faith: The Case for Secular Humanism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2014). Engelke writes, "Secular humanism may well begin with doubt—'about religion, of course.' But it ought to end with doubt, too—about itself, about its own structures, presuppositions, and sufficiency." Engelke, "Soft Atheism," *Public Books*, February 15, 2015, <http://www.publicbooks.org/nonfiction/soft-atheism>, retrieved on February 27, 2015.

responsibility. Greg is religious, but he is also a freethinker.

Not everyone agrees on the connotations of “freethinker.” When I asked the head of a major atheist organization what he thought of the “freethinker” label, he told me he considers it “a broad term” with a “softer connotation,” used by “atheists who don’t like the word ‘atheist.’” An activist who has worked in various roles at humanist organizations expressed a similar opinion over drinks one night, telling me that “freethinker” has replaced “agnostic” as the preferred term for atheists trying not to offend believers. Leaders at FFRF acknowledge that “freethinker” is more inclusive than “atheist,” but they resist an understanding as capacious as Greg’s, and as an organization, they do not pull their punches. The essay prompt quoted above provides a good example of the limits of their use of “freethinker” as a category of inclusion; qualifying the term, they offer the following parenthetical of synonyms: “(Atheist/Agnostic/Nonbeliever).” Though one leader I interviewed at FFRF told me that the group “doesn’t care what you call yourself,” she followed up by saying a membership survey revealed around three quarters of the group’s members identify as “atheist,” and the other quarter “agnostic.”

In all of these examples, freethought provides a way to express what is bad about religion, or at least about certain kinds of religion. The dangers of clerical authority and dogma are especially present when nonbelievers organize into groups because groups usually have leaders and can require formal ideological commitments for membership. As Bill made clear, leaders at FFRF feel the need to encourage autonomy and minimize anything that resembles a creed. The group even ran a billboard campaign in which the warning “Beware of Dogma” was written in a baroque calligraphic font against a backdrop

of stained glass windows. Leaders of other organizations feel the same anxiety and continually reassert their awareness of the dangers of authority and dogma.<sup>140</sup> In so doing, they reassert the boundary between their secular organizations and religious ones—or in the case of religious humanists, between the good kinds of religion and the bad. Perceptions of structural isomorphism produce the demand for purification.

The above examples also reveal another concern that is closely related to authority and dogma and yet distinct. Freethought also demands that the individual assert her autonomy through critical thinking and reason. “Doubt” is crucial, as is active interrogation of tradition. Even if a group has no formally shared dogma or creed and avoids establishing anyone in a position of strong authority, group belonging still poses a danger to individual reason and will. Because it is one of the primary concerns of the so-called “New Atheists” and because it underpins their influential understanding of religion, the following section takes a closer look at “groupthink” and its role in the boundary work of organized nonbelievers.

### **3. The Dangers of Groupthink**

On April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, A.C. Grayling spoke to a large, mostly undergraduate audience at Columbia University. The event was scheduled for 9:00pm to give Grayling time to make it

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<sup>140</sup> Though none of the nonbelievers whom I interviewed expressed anxiety about the trust they place in scientific authority, some critics have framed this trust as a kind of “faith” or “fundamentalism,” in which science is a new “God.” See, for example, William A. Stahl, “One-dimensional Rage: The Social Epistemology of the New Atheism and Fundamentalism,” *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Boston: Brill, 2010), 97-108; and Michael Ian Borer, “The New Atheism and the Secularization Thesis,” *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Boston: Brill, 2010), 125-137.

uptown after taping an interview for the satirical pundit show, *The Colbert Report*, where he was promoting his new book *The God Argument*. During the interview, host Stephen Colbert showed a fool's artful wisdom when he pointed to the similarity between Grayling's humanism and religion:

*Stephen Colbert:* What's humanism, sir?

*A.C. Grayling:* Humanism is an attitude about how we live the moral life. It's about where you start.

*Colbert:* That's called religion. How you live the moral life. We have the laws from God. Obey them. End of story.

*Grayling:* Well, there is a much older and richer view which extends from classical antiquity, from the Greek philosophers, which says that we, we human beings, are responsible for thinking about our ethical outlook. Not a set of laws or a code which comes from outside us. We have to take responsibility for ourselves, not just about how we're going to live good and flourishing lives, but how we're going to relate well to other people. That's really what humanism is.

Grayling distinguishes humanism from religion in three ways: humanism rejects an external code or authority; it asserts the personal responsibility of human beings; and it is older. His dubious chronology aside, Grayling's first two distinctions are familiar hallmarks of freethought. Though he does not use the term in his books, he told his audience at Columbia that "freethinker" is one the self-appellations that he prefers. He avoids describing himself as an "atheist," arguing that it is "a theist's term" and that he "would rather be afairyist."<sup>141</sup> Like other humanists whom I discuss in the next chapter, Grayling connects his tradition to ancient Greece and expressly imbues it with an emphasis on ethics.

From Socrates, and also, to an extent, from Plato and Aristotle, Grayling builds a

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<sup>141</sup> These quotes are from Grayling's talk at Columbia University on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2013, though he also writes on his rejection the "atheist" label and uses the term "afairyist." See A.C. Grayling, *Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness* (London: Oberon Books, 2007), 28.

philosophy centered on critical thinking and individual reasoning. “Not a lot of *autonomous thinking* about the nature of the good goes on,” he told his audience at Columbia. “Young religions of the world,” by which he meant Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, “are all shaped by ‘command and challenge’ and defined by submission.” Throughout his talk, he emphasized that religion does not rely on reasons or justifications because it requires only faith; religious people obey without question.<sup>142</sup> He echoes the criticisms of authority and dogma outlined in the previous section, but he also adds an element that is crucial for understanding how he and authors like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins imagine religion and religious people. In their view, religion is by definition uncritical and unreflective, and by extension, so are the religious.

In *The God Argument*, Grayling quotes Socrates from Plato’s *Apology*: “The unconsidered life is not worth living.”<sup>143</sup> Inverting this statement, he told students at Columbia, “The life most worth living is the considered life.” For Grayling, the religious life is unconsidered, and he likens religious belief to mental enslavement six times in *The God Argument*. He writes, “The major reason for the continuance of religious belief...is indoctrination of children before they reach the age of reason, together with...social pressure to conform, social reinforcement of religious institutions and traditions, emotion,

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<sup>142</sup> For an in-depth, survey-based account of how Americans think about religion in light of the criticisms raised by Grayling and the New Atheists, see Robert Wuthnow, *The God Problem: Expressing Faith and Being Reasonable* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). For critiques of how Grayling and the New Atheists imagine religion, see Terry Eagleton, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009) and Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008).

<sup>143</sup> Grayling, *God Argument*, 141.

and (it has to be said) ignorance.”<sup>144</sup>

This last sentence is worth parsing. The best life—that which is most worth living—belongs to the individual who is mentally autonomous or self-determining. Not only does this mean being free from the authority and dogma of religious institutions and traditions, but also free from social pressures. Religion is emotionally manipulative, socially imposed groupthink, and it depends on ignorance. Avoiding this kind of religious pollution requires an effort by the individual to assert autonomy and to actively criticize received ideas through the use of critical reason. One can achieve this rational autonomy by becoming educated in the right knowledge.

The danger of groupthink is inherently more of a problem for nonbelievers who organize than those who do not. Leaders who found nonbeliever groups need to avoid authoritarian structures and the imposition of creedal commitments. The individuals who join need to avoid the dangers of groupthink. Even when nonbelievers avow their adherence to a shared belief system, such as nontheistic humanism, it needs to encourage rational autonomy in order to avoid becoming religious pollution. The so-called “New Atheists” imagine religion as inherently social and distinguish it from the more personal and individual “spirituality” or “religious experience.” Taking a closer look at how they understand religion will help demonstrate some of the challenges that leaders face as they try to organize nonbelievers who worry about the dangerous potential of any community or group.

Writing in *Bookforum* in 2005, Wayne State University Professor Ronald Aronson

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 16.



coined the term “new atheists” to describe an emerging set of authors who develop an atheism that could “absorb the experience of the twentieth century and the issues of the twenty-first.”<sup>145</sup> In the opening pages of his essay, Aronson reviews Alister McGrath’s *The Twilight of Atheism*, granting McGrath the argument that “disbelief” is in decline and needs new ways of understanding itself that are free of the teleology of the secularization thesis and more focused on “the vital questions about how to live one’s life.”<sup>146</sup> Aronson emphasizes the “newness” of the new atheism to argue that it differs from older forms that he and McGrath believe are out of step with contemporary concerns. Half-prescriptive in his tone, Aronson argues that this new atheism “has made a beginning, but much remains to be done.”<sup>147</sup>

Of the authors whom Aronson dubs the “new atheists,” only Sam Harris has achieved widespread popularity in the United States.<sup>148</sup> The other works Aronson reviews include French philosopher Michel Onfray’s *Le Traité d’athéologie*, published in the United States as *The Atheist Manifesto*; Julian Baggini’s *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction*; Erik Wielenberg’s *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe*; and Daniel Harbour’s *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Atheism*.<sup>149</sup> Writing again in 2007, this time in *The Nation*, Aronson

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<sup>145</sup> Ronald Aronson, “Faith No More? Against the Rising Tide of Rejuvenated Religion, a Number of Writers Make the Case for Disbelief,” *Bookforum* 12:3 (October/November 2005): 16-19.

<sup>146</sup> Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Doubleday, 2004).

<sup>147</sup> Aronson, “Faith No More?”, 19.

<sup>148</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: Norton, 2004).

<sup>149</sup> Michel Onfray, *Le Traité d’athéologie: Physique de la métaphysique* (Paris: Grasset, 2005). Onfray, *The Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, trans. Jeremy Leggatt (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2007). Julian Baggini, *Atheism: A Very Short*

capitalized and canonized the “New Atheists” with a review of four works in addition to Harris’s *The End of Faith*: Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great*, Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*, and Harris’s *Letter to a Christian Nation*.<sup>150</sup> Though Aronson does not explain what makes these atheists “new” besides their dates of publication, he describes the four authors as sharing in a passionate attack on religion that “speak[s] to and for” a segment of nonbelieving Americans who “feel beleaguered” and “voiceless in the public arena.”<sup>151</sup>

Many of those I interviewed and spoke with throughout my fieldwork told me that the New Atheists were a catalyst in their lives—whether for leaving religion, “coming out” as a nonbeliever, joining a nonbeliever community, or becoming involved in secular activism. One leader who founded a humanist group in New York City in the 1990s described Hitchens as his “hero,” and a young woman I met at a student leadership conference half-jokingly revealed that she wanted to find out where Harris lives so that she could knock on his door and profess her love. Other leaders reflected on the impact of the New Atheism for nonbelievers and their organizations. Though one prominent atheist told me that he does not like using the “New Atheist” label “because there’s nothing new about them,” he also told me that their books “really got people reading,” and there used to be “a dearth of books on atheism.” Another leader observed that the New Atheists “made

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*Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003). Erik J. Wielenberg, *Value and Virtue in a Godless Universe* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). Daniel Harbour, *An Intelligent Person’s Guide to Atheism* (London: Duckworth Publishers, 2003).

<sup>150</sup> Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006). Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2006). Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin, 2006). Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

<sup>151</sup> Ronald Aronson, “The New Atheists,” *The Nation* 285:24 (2007): 12-13.

‘atheism’ more visible” and inspired her humanist organization to start using “atheism” and “atheist” more frequently in its publications and press releases.

In their interviews with organized nonbelievers who “self-identify as atheists and were involved in the organized secularist movement,” Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith found that nearly all of their research participants had read at least one book by the New Atheists.<sup>152</sup> They also argue that the New Atheists weakened the taboo against atheism in the United States and provided nonbelievers with a way to imagine themselves as a community and perhaps even a social movement.<sup>153</sup> Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp assert the importance of the New Atheists for organized atheism and assume that the “new atheist movement” is a social movement in their analysis of atheist collective identity and boundary work.<sup>154</sup> Taking a more cautious approach, Jesse M. Smith uses the academic literature on social movements to study atheist collective identity formation, but he intentionally avoids calling organized atheism a “social movement.”<sup>155</sup> Though only Cimino and Smith attend carefully to the diversity of labels used by America’s organized nonbelievers, all of the emerging sociological literature sees the New Atheists as central to organized nonbelievers’ attempts to understand themselves and their relationship to

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<sup>152</sup> Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “The New Atheism and the Formation of the Imagined Secularist Community,” *Journal of Religion and Media* 10 (2011): 27, 33.

<sup>153</sup> Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “The New Atheism and the Empowerment of American Freethinkers,” *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Boston: Brill, 2010), 139-156.

<sup>154</sup> Katja M. Guenther, Kerry Mulligan, and Cameron Papp, “From the Outside In: Crossing Boundaries to Build Collective Identity in the New Atheist Movement,” *Social Problems* 60:4 (November 2013): 457-475.

<sup>155</sup> Jesse M. Smith, “Creating a Godless Community: The Collective-Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52:1 (2013): 80-99.

religion and religious believers.<sup>156</sup>

While there are certainly differences in the ways that Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett imagine religion and the degree to which they express an allergy to it, there is much that they share.<sup>157</sup> “Groupthink” describes a key aspect of the “religion” that they consider antithetical to individuality, autonomy, critical thinking, and rationality. All of the New Atheists argue that religion depends on a natural herd mentality and reinforces or exacerbates tensions between social groups. As Hitchens writes, “For emphasizing tribe and dynasty and racial provenance in its holy books, religion must accept the responsibility for transmitting one of mankind’s most primitive illusions down through the generations.”<sup>158</sup> He continues, “It was never that difficult to see that religion was a cause of hatred and conflict, and that its maintenance depended upon ignorance and superstition.”<sup>159</sup>

Harris makes a similar argument: “Religion raises the stakes of human conflict much higher than tribalism, racism, or politics ever can, as it is the only form of in-group/out-group thinking that casts the differences between people in terms of eternal rewards and

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<sup>156</sup> See also Stephen LeDrew, who downplays the importance of the New Atheists while relying on just fifteen interviews and conceding that twelve of those had read at least one book by the New Atheists, and the other three had watched their lectures online. LeDrew, “Discovering Atheism: Heterogeneity in Trajectories to Atheist Identity and Activism,” *Sociology of Religion* 74:4 (2013): 431-453.

<sup>157</sup> In *The God Problem*, Robert Wuthnow provides a concise summary of the criticisms that Grayling and the New Atheists level against religion. In their view, religion is irrational, uninformed, antidemocratic, destructive, and fraudulent. See Wuthnow, *The God Problem*, 7-44.

<sup>158</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 251.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

punishments.”<sup>160</sup> Dawkins also argues that religion cultivates and exacerbates groupness: “Even if religion did no other harm in itself, its wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness—its deliberate and cultivated pandering to humanity’s natural tendency to favour [sic] in-groups and shun out-groups—would be enough to make it a significant force for evil in the world.”<sup>161</sup> Religion’s perpetuation of social division depends on its encouragement of ignorance and active suppression of individual reason.

Dennett agrees that religion is the product of natural human weakness, to be overcome only through education and critical rationality. According to his definition, it is inherently social and theistic: “Tentatively, I propose to define religions as *social systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought*. This is, of course, a circuitous way of articulating the idea that a religion without *God* or *gods* is like a vertebrate without a backbone.”<sup>162</sup> Given that he sees religion as a problem, he offers a solution: “So, in the end, my central policy recommendation is that we [Euro-Americans] gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives. Ignorance is nothing shameful; *imposing* ignorance is shameful.”<sup>163</sup> Religion is a social problem that should be addressed as such. Euro-

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<sup>160</sup> Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 26.

<sup>161</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 297.

<sup>162</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9. Emphasis in original.

<sup>163</sup> *Ibid.*, 339. Emphasis in original. I have written elsewhere about the dangers of New Atheists mapping binaries of us/them and education/ignorance onto the interests of empire: Joseph Blankholm, “Terry Eagleton, New Atheism, and the War on Terror,” *The Immanent Frame*, November 12, 2010, <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2010/11/12/terry-eagleton-new-atheism-and-the-war-on-terror/>, accessed September 22, 2011. SUNY-Albany political scientist Marcus Schulzke argues that New Atheism is “a loosely organized social movement” that espouses a form of political liberalism more than a theology:

American ways of knowing, such as individual rational choice, should be firmly imposed in order to eliminate harmful ignorance perpetuated by theistic ideologies.

Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens all express reservations about calling Buddhism a religion, and Dennett's two-part definition indirectly raise the same concerns: Does religion require belief in the supernatural, is "religious experience" the same as "religion," and do nontheistic or individualized religions pose the same danger as theistic ones? Hitchens decries Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka, but as he suggests, "It can even be argued that Buddhism is not, in our sense of the word, a 'religion' at all."<sup>164</sup> Dawkins argues the same, questioning whether "Buddhism or Confucianism" should be considered religions, and reframing them in language that echoes Grayling's humanism, as "ethical systems or philosophies of life."<sup>165</sup> He implies that religions all assert "the God hypothesis," so nontheistic religions are not *actually* religions.<sup>166</sup> Dennett avoids this problem altogether by explicitly defining religion as theistic or at very least believing in the supernatural, which exempts materialist forms of Buddhism.

Harris and Dennett, in particular, address whether "religion" differs from "spirituality" or "religious experience." Citing his disagreement with William James's highly individualized definition of religion, Dennett draws a clear boundary between social religion and private spirituality: "Not wanting to ignore [those with 'private religions'], but needing to distinguish them from the much, much more typical religious people who

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Schulzke, "The Politics of New Atheism," *Religion and Politics* (FirstView 2013), doi: 10.1017/S1755048313000217.

<sup>164</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 199.

<sup>165</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 59.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 58-59.

identify themselves with a particular creed or church that has many other members, I shall call them *spiritual* people, but not *religious*.”<sup>167</sup> For Harris, certain forms of Buddhism and other ways of being “mystical” or “spiritual” are distinct from “religion”: “Distortion of the tradition notwithstanding, it remains true that the esoteric teachings of Buddhism offer the most complete methodology we have for discovering the intrinsic freedom of consciousness, unencumbered by any dogma.”<sup>168</sup> Tersely, he writes, “Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not.”<sup>169</sup> His most recent book, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*, is an attempt to recover the “spiritual” and the “mystical.”<sup>170</sup> According to Harris, “Far too often, these words are invoked in support of religious beliefs that are morally and intellectually grotesque.”<sup>171</sup> For Dennett, spirituality is religion made private and thus purified of the social aspect that makes it religious; for Harris, when pursued correctly, spirituality is rational, individualistic, and free from dogma and authority.

As Dennett acknowledges, “We may find that drawing a boundary between *religion* and its nearest neighbors among cultural phenomena is beset with...problems.”<sup>172</sup> New Atheist attempts to distinguish among religion, nontheistic organizations, and private spirituality reflect anxieties about religious pollution. By making fine distinctions, and in turn, by influencing nonbelievers with their bestselling books, the New Atheists share in

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<sup>167</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 11.

<sup>168</sup> Harris, *End of Faith*, 293-294. Harris uses the terms “mysticism” and “spirituality” interchangeably; *ibid.*, 205.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 221.

<sup>170</sup> Sam Harris, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster: 2014).

<sup>171</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>172</sup> Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 8. Emphasis in original.

the construction of boundaries that shape how nonbelievers organize. They recognize the potential dangers of groupthink, authority, and dogma in any collective enterprise, and as respected figures in the reading public of organized nonbelievers, the distinctions that they draw authorize certain beliefs, behaviors, and ways of belonging that are isomorphic or otherwise proximate to “religion.” They are agents of secular purity.

The allergy that many nonbelievers have to groupthink, authority, and dogma makes them notoriously difficult to organize.<sup>173</sup> Writing in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins repeats a dry joke that I heard often when talking with the leaders of nonbeliever organizations: “Indeed, organizing atheists has been compared to herding cats, because they tend to think independently and will not conform to authority.”<sup>174</sup> Leaders also call nonbelievers “non-joiners,” and because “nonbeliever” can imply “nontheistic” or the more capacious “nonreligious,” they often think of nonbelievers as inherently averse to communities that seem at all similar to religious congregations. One leader in the Ethical Culture movement described the uphill battle of gaining and keeping members: “If you

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<sup>173</sup> Psychologists studying nonbelief have asked whether it is “natural” and whether underlying cognitive predispositions determine whether someone will be a nonbeliever. For useful entry points to these debates, see Dominic Johnson, “What are atheists for? Hypotheses on the functions of non-belief in the evolution of religion,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 2:1 (February 2012): 48-99; Catherine Caldwell-Harris, “Understanding atheism/non-belief as an expected individual-differences variable,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 2:1 (February 2012): 4-47. Caldwell-Harris shows strong evidence that nonbelievers “are less social than religious believers, less conformist, and more individualistic.” John Shook’s response to Caldwell-Harris most closely resembles the approach taken by this dissertation. Shook, “Atheists are rejecting today’s culturally evolved religions, not a ‘first’ natural religion,” *Religion, Brain & Behavior* 2:1 (February 2012): 38-40. For a general study of the psychology of organized nonbelievers, see Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America’s Nonbelievers* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2006).

<sup>174</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, 27.



can't promise eternal life, and you're not haranguing, and if everyone who joins is a non-joiner by definition, it's tough." His phrase "non-joiner by definition" is confusing if one defines nonbelief, atheism, or nontheism as merely the lack of belief in God, gods, or the supernatural. But if one sees nonbelief as part of a larger and more complex framework, the equation of non-joiner and nonbeliever becomes legible.

#### **4. Allergies to Ritual and Practice**

"I just didn't need the ritualistic thing that I'd already experienced in a Catholic Church," Phil told me. "Some have this need for spirituality, and there's certainly some need for fellowship. Song does have a lot of good qualities. I just don't need that stuff." Phil's attitude is common among organized nonbelievers who are not part of a community that incorporates rituals or practices borrowed from religion. Leaders I spoke with from the more adamantly secular organizations, like the Freedom From Religion Foundation and American Atheists, did not disparage ritual or decry it as dangerous. Occasionally, leaders dismissed religion-like services and rituals as "pseudo-religion," and two leaders with a background in humanism implied that Sunday services and singing hymns were crutches for the weak-minded, the nostalgic, or the secretly "spiritual." Most, however, talked about ritual in more neutral terms that expressed a personal preference rather than a sweeping condemnation.

Martin, a leader who had trained to become a humanist chaplain, thinks of ritual as necessary, but something he likes to avoid if he can. "I'm just not comfortable with the ritual aspect of humanism," he told me. "It's great to do weddings and funerals, but I'm not

interested in the ritual side.” Martin learned to conduct life-cycle rituals such as weddings, funerals, and naming ceremonies, and though he sees them as part of the role that he is proud to occupy in his community, “It’s just not how I want to spend my weekend.” Martin identifies with the New Atheists, and especially Christopher Hitchens, whom he mentioned several times in our interview. He drew distinctions between his approach and that of other humanists whom he knows who embrace ritual more enthusiastically. Martin sees himself as more “New Atheist” than other humanists, and his indifference to ritual is consistent with his general aversion to religion.

Candid interviews with the New Atheists reveal that Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, and Dennett are more accepting of “religion” than they might at first appear. On September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2007, the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science organized an unmoderated conversation that billed the authors as the “Four Horsemen” of New Atheism. Discussing the value of religious art, Hitchens suggested, “The great cultural project, in other words, may very well be to rescue what we have of the art and aesthetic of religion while discarding the supernatural.”<sup>175</sup> They turned next to the question of religious holidays and other rituals:

*Sam Harris:* Well, we were all outed with our Christmas trees last year.

*Richard Dawkins:* I have not the slightest problem with Christmas trees.

*Daniel Dennett:* No, no, we had our Christmas card with our pictures of us.

*Christopher Hitchens:* It’s a good old Norse booze-up. And why the hell not?

*Harris:* Right.

*Dennett:* Well, but it’s not just that, I mean, we...

*Hitchens:* I like solstices as much as the next person.

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<sup>175</sup> A transcript of the conversation is available at the Richard Dawkins Foundation website: <http://richarddawkinsfoundation.org/fourhorsementranscript> (accessed January 20, 2014). Video of the two-hour conversation can also be found on YouTube: [http://youtu.be/vZ-xK\\_PEDgc](http://youtu.be/vZ-xK_PEDgc) (accessed January 20, 2014).

*Dennett:* We have an annual Christmas carol party, where we sing the music and all the music with all the words, and not the secular Christmas stuff.

*Dawkins:* And why not? Yes.

*Dennett:* And it's just glorious stuff. That part of the Christian story is fantastic. It's just a beautiful tale. And you can love every inch of it without believing.

Dawkins continued the exchange with an anecdote about a Rabbi who was angry to discover that he says grace. He considers grace "a matter of simple courtesy," and he resented her accusation of hypocrisy. "It may mean something to you," he told the Rabbi, "but it means absolutely nothing to me. This is a Latin formula, which has some history, and I appreciate history. [A.J.] 'Freddie' Ayer, the philosopher, also used to say grace, and what he said was, 'I won't utter falsehoods, but I've no objection to uttering meaningless statements.'" For Dawkins and the other New Atheists, ritual is acceptable and even enjoyable so long as one removes the "irrationality," as Dennett puts it.

Having declared himself a "cultural Christian" on more than one occasion, Dawkins likens the term to "cultural Jew" and has stated that Britain "is historically a Christian country."<sup>176</sup> Despite his outspoken criticism of religion, he believes Christianity has a special place in British and American culture: "So, yes, I like singing carols along with everybody else. I'm not one of those who wants to purge our society of our Christian history."<sup>177</sup> Like Martin, he does not try to stop others from performing certain rituals, even if he prefers to avoid them: "There are people who try to get atheists to form a sort of

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<sup>176</sup> *BBC News*, "Dawkins: I'm a cultural Christian," December 10, 2007, available at [http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk\\_news/politics/7136682.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/uk_news/politics/7136682.stm) (accessed January 20, 2014).

<sup>177</sup> Paul Bowers, "Q&A with Richard Dawkins: 'I guess I'm a cultural Christian,'" *Charleston City Paper*, March 4, 2013, available at <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/qanda-with-richard-dawkins-i-guess-im-a-cultural-christian/Content?oid=4581071> (accessed January 20, 2013).

atheist church and have atheist community singsongs and things. I don't see the need for that, but if people want to do it, why shouldn't they?"<sup>178</sup>

As discussed in the last section, Harris more than accepts Buddhist meditation; he actively supports it.<sup>179</sup> Though I never asked those I interviewed about meditative practices, several mentioned them without prompting, and only one person thought they were harmful. Mark, an activist who serves on the board of two national organizations that advocate for the separation of church and state, identifies strongly as an atheist and a secular humanist and told me that the local nonbeliever groups he attends "expressly avoid activities like a church might have, like a hiking club." "People might have interests [they share], and friendships can form," he told me, "but that's separate. The magnet is the humanist, atheist, skeptic worldview." Near the end of our interview, when I was asking Mark about his religious background, the conversation turned abruptly to Sam Harris and meditation. Given his earlier comments, I had assumed, naively, that Mark would have an aversion to any kind of religious ritual or practice, and I was surprised to discover that he had spent years meditating. He was hesitant to discuss the topic because he worried I would get the wrong impression, but he opened up once he discovered that I was familiar with Harris's argument and had learned a form of Chan meditation the summer before.

Mark sees Harris as trying "to merge nonbelief activism with an exhortation for people to examine Eastern pathways of internal discovery or investigation." He views his own engagement differently and told me, "That part of my life is not really relevant to my claims to the nonexistence of God. I have a tough enough time getting my atheist arguments

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> See Harris, *Waking Up*.

out there. So unlike Sam, it's not my thing to explain to people whatever possible benefits there might be to a naturalistic form of meditation." According to Mark, "There's nothing wrong with nonbelievers maintaining the outward forms of certain rituals, like Christmas or Hanukkah. These ritualistic connections with heritage are not the problem. The problem is believing the underlying myths." He clarified further: "These practices can have a benefit for the nonbeliever if the nonbeliever stops at the core, where the supernatural or paranormal begins. They're valuable up to a point, but I'll get off the train sooner than others."

Though I had gotten the impression that he still meditates often, he ended the topic by implying that he no longer does. He told me that he is "not looking for a naturalistic meditation practice," because "the task of promoting atheism doesn't give [him] time to explore something like that." The conversation made Mark uncomfortable because, by his own account, meditation seemed too religious. It is at very least a practice associated with a tradition, Buddhism, that many, if not most people consider a religion. Mark was careful to remind me that he only practiced "naturalistic" meditation, and his knowledge of various forms revealed that he had searched for a secular practice—a way to meditate that is free of religious pollution.

The boundaries that Mark and Martin draw are similar to those drawn by the New Atheists, and especially those of Harris. Though not all nonbelievers agree on where to draw these boundaries, organized nonbelievers, and especially those who are active at the national level, understand how others imagine them, and they negotiate a range of perceptions and pre-empt potential questions about their secular purity or the degree to

which religion pollutes. How nonbelievers understand certain rituals and practices—whether they bear the stain of religion, or whether they can be purified of that stain— influences how they perform the secular and the steps they take to avoid the bad kinds of religion. Mark, Martin, and Harris all associate religion with primarily belief and irrationality, freeing them up to explore the bodily domain of practice without having to worry so much about religious pollution.

As the next chapter will show, these boundaries also determine the types of communities that nonbelievers are willing to join, if they join them at all. For some, like Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens, the Christian tradition contains much that is beautiful, and if purified of its irrationality and its supernatural content, it can be enjoyed without anxiety. For nonbelievers who agree with Harris, the same is true for Buddhism, and especially the practice of meditation. Removing religion's *bad* parts, borrowing only its *good* parts, and creating something merely *similar*, are all ways of protecting oneself and one's community from religious pollution.

## **5. Evangelizing, Advocating, or Secularizing?**

### **The Good News of Atheism**

"Evangelism," writes Dan Barker, "is a perfectly good word. The Greek word 'angel' means 'messenger.' Evangelism is simply 'good news.'<sup>180</sup> Writing in 1993, in the pages of *Freethought Today*, Barker published a short essay purifying evangelism of its religious

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<sup>180</sup> Dan Barker, "Evangelical Atheism: Leading Believers Astray," *Freethought Today* (January/February 1993), available at <http://ffrf.org/legacy/fttoday/back/evangel.html> (accessed January 20, 2014).

pollution and encouraging freethinkers to try to convert believers. The article is a how-to guide for spreading the good news of nonbelief to committed Christians, both conservative and liberal. “The only way to attract someone is by being attractive,” he writes. “If you want to win someone to your side, then treat them like a friend.” He goes on to give a range of practical advice that includes insisting on dialogue, reading popular Christian books, memorizing Biblical contradictions, and having an infectious love for knowledge. Barker writes from experience, having spent nineteen years preaching the gospel and building a career as a Christian songwriter before leaving his faith and becoming a self-avowed freethinker.<sup>181</sup> Today he is co-president of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

Barker is not the only leader and activist to embrace the “evangelical” label. One especially charismatic leader named Jacqueline described herself as “an evangelical atheist,” and told me that she “will evangelize as soon as religion comes on the table.” She is involved with several organizations, but she identifies most strongly with American Atheists (AA), which she describes as “the point on the sword” and “the farthest out there.” (Leaders at AA adopt similar language, calling themselves “the marines of the freethought movement,” “hard noses,” “hardliners,” “militants,” and “the edge of the sword.”) “They’re beating on bushes to get atheists to come out of hiding,” Jacqueline told me. She also described AA as “a deeply American organization” because “they’re fighting for protections for all.”

Wanting to purify others of their religious pollution presents a kind of paradox because it can appear both aggressively secular and isomorphic to religion. Unlike other

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<sup>181</sup> Dan Barker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America’s Leading Atheists* (Berkeley: Ulysses Press, 2008).

kinds of perceived religious pollution, “evangelizing” appeals more to “hardliners” than it does to moderates or religious nontheists. Jacqueline and other atheists who think of themselves as “militant” or “hardline” often revel in blasphemy and even pepper their speech with curse words in a casual way that might seem intended to offend. Like Dawkins saying grace, however, they are trying to empty the words of their power—an act of appropriation that intentionally denies what they see as an irrational, religion-based taboo. Inasmuch as their appropriation asserts a semiotics in which language names arbitrarily, they intend it as an aggressive denial of a taken-for-granted relationship between language and the divine. And inasmuch as denying such a relationship is offensive to those who believe in it, they intend to offend.<sup>182</sup>

Cursing and other acts of blasphemy become ways for hardliners to demonstrate that they do not share or respect the ontology that a religious semiotics tacitly endorses. Put simply, taking God’s name in vain is a performance that reclaims language and denies the censorial power of those who associate a word with a supernatural being. Thus while many hardliners I met will avoid saying “bless you” when someone sneezes because they do not want to support the infiltration of religious language into everyday speech, the ironic use of “evangelist” or “evangelical” has an irreverent, even blasphemous appeal.<sup>183</sup> As Jacqueline’s usage implies, “evangelical” can be a kind of code word for describing an

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<sup>182</sup> For more on the role of semiotics in narratives of disenchantment, see Robert Yelle, *Semiotics of Religion* (New York: Continuum, 2012) and *The Language of Disenchantment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>183</sup> See Robert A. Yelle, “Secular Blasphemies: Symbolic Offense in Modern Democracy,” in *Profane: Sacrilegious Expression in a Multicultural Age*, ed. Christopher S. Grenda, Christopher Beneke, and David Nash (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 141-166.



interest in converting theists, rather than avoiding them or winning them as allies. Being an “evangelical atheist” is one way of being secular.

Many hardline or “evangelical” nonbelievers take advantage of any opportunity to discuss their nonbelief. An activist named Charles who works at the Secular Student Alliance—a national organization with nearly four hundred affiliate groups at universities, community colleges, and high schools throughout the country—told me that he sees introducing himself as an opportunity to talk about his atheism:<sup>184</sup>

I think that atheist is certainly the most politically charged word, and because of that, I’m quick to use it when I’m talking about myself in public. If I don’t use “atheist,” people think I’m being bashful. It’s just better to come out and say it. [...] If I’m on an airplane and someone asks me what I do, I say, “I’m a professional atheist.”

Charles knows he can avoid the topic by saying he works for a nonprofit or using more ambiguous terms like “secular” or “freethinker.” He consciously uses “atheist” because he wants his interlocutor to know for certain that he does not believe in God.

Frank, who works for a secular humanist organization in California, also looks for opportunities to engage theists. He told me that a teacher at a local Christian high school invites him to talk about humanism and atheism twice a year.

I give a lecture to their comparative religion class about our side: atheism, agnosticism, secular humanism. I think I've snagged a couple of converts over the years. There's a teacher there who brings me in every time. I give him a lot of credit because I don't pull any punches with these kids. I try to do it in a way that's not adversarial, but I really challenge them.

Frank also told me that soon after our interview, he was going to make his second visit to a church that is “completely geared to young people,” with a rock band, big screen

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<sup>184</sup> As of January 23, 2014, SSA has 375 local affiliates. An updated list is available at <http://www.secularstudents.org/affiliates>.

televisions, and smoke machines. The first time he went, he brought “a couple of pretty hardcore atheists” with him, and they were skeptical about the pastor’s motive for inviting them onstage for a discussion. Though he, too, was wary, he insisted on being kind and open, adopting a similar approach to that advocated by Barker:

The worst thing I could be is the angry guy and the bitter atheist. I was relaxed and happy and unabashed about my positions. Tried to be engaging and pleasant. That’s it. There was nothing for them to dislike about the way I was. They’re still not going to agree with me, but at least they’re not going to pin “He’s an evil person” on me.

Frank considers these visits to be part of his job as a leader at an organization for secular humanists. Though he speculated that the motive for Christians who invite him might be “to build bridges between communities,” he remained hopeful that pointing out Biblical contradictions and making science-based, rational arguments would cast seeds of doubt. In general, Frank was less hostile toward religious believers than confused by them. Several times during our interview, he told me how difficult it was for him to understand how evangelical Christians and Scientologists could hold their respective beliefs, and he assumed that with a little skepticism, their ways of seeing the world would unravel.

For organized nonbelievers, skepticism can mean distrusting emotions and emotional appeals, which in turn shapes how they argue for nontheism. While attending a student leadership conference in upstate New York that gathered leaders from campus groups throughout the country, I noticed that several of the speakers emphasized the importance of emotion. Organizers I spoke to confirmed my suspicion that the focus was intentional. According to a speaker named Justin, “Research shows that people listen more to people who are nice to them,” and he suggested that students “open up” their “facial and body expressions” and “remember to smile. [...] Keep a positive tone: people remember the

feeling of an engagement longer than the message.” “You’re not pandering to people, and you’re not lying to them,” he assured the students. He wanted them to reflect on their misgivings: “Pathos, passion, emotion—emotional appeals and personal connections. This is what we tend to be the least good at in the skeptical community.”

Justin wanted to make the connection between skepticism and distrusting emotions explicit because he sees the latter as an impediment to the spread of nontheism. This connection is more complicated than it might seem, however, because not all skeptics are nonbelievers. Organized nonbelievers often make a point to distinguish the “skeptic” community or movement from the “secular,” “freethought,” or “atheist” movement because skeptics can be religious theists while still being skeptical of superstition and the paranormal. Though all of the leaders I met from skeptic organizations like the James Randi Education Foundation and the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry are personally nontheistic, they want to remain open to their theistic members, and they choose their rhetoric carefully. One leader at a major skeptic organization told me that he uses the terms “rational” and “rationalist movement” in an attempt to combine the “skeptic” and “secular” communities. Because everyday organized nonbelievers consider themselves skeptical, they sometimes use “skeptic” as a broader umbrella category that emphasizes what the overlapping communities share. In their parlance, “skeptic” is a broader term than “nonbeliever” and can include the “religious” and “theists.”

Because Justin knew that many of the students in his audience think that being “skeptical” and “rational” means avoiding emotional manipulation, he wanted them to understand that emotions are both unavoidable and valuable for persuasion. “Emotional

response is normal," he told the student leaders. "It's not manipulation to appeal to people's emotions." Appealing to the many *Star Trek* fans in the audience, he offered an analogy: "You can't be Spock, and it's not effective to be Spock. [...] It's not honest to be unemotional about something that you actually feel strongly about." Justin and the other speakers who talked about emotion emphasized three main points: 1) your emotional responses are normal and acceptable; 2) understanding other people's emotions is important for persuading them; 3) you will not be able to logically convince people that their theistic beliefs are incorrect. Justin practiced what he preached, breaking into tears near the end of his talk. Those I spoke to afterward found him convincing.<sup>185</sup>

Compared with leaders from national organizations and local groups not based on campuses, student leaders generally expressed far less anxiety about bold attempts to convert believers. While at a humanist conference in New Orleans, I attended a workshop aimed at sharing strategies for recruiting and retaining members. Two students from a university in Corpus Christi, Texas, described their approach as "shock and awe." In one event they organized called "The Great God Debate," they set up two microphones and put a sign on each: "God" and "No God." They encouraged bystanders to give speeches, which they kept under two minutes with the help of a moderator. For another event, they created a large sign that read, "Wear pants if you don't believe in God' Day." They also hoped to emulate a group in San Antonio that started a "Smut for Smut" campaign, in which they distributed pornography in exchange for Bibles. By contrast, leaders in the workshop who

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<sup>185</sup> Ann Pellegrini argues that secular intellectuals have had a similar aversion to religion, and in particular, religious feelings in the decades since the Iranian Revolution. See Pellegrini, "Feeling Secular," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 19:2 (2009): 205-218.

organize communities that are open to non-students suggested less confrontational ways to recruit and retain members, such as “soup kitchen events,” writing letters to new members by hand, and having pizza at meetings.

Not all student groups take such an aggressive approach, and many promote interfaith events as a way to legitimize their organizations and situate them as alternatives to religious groups on campus. Students generally seemed less concerned with crossing boundaries that might make nonbelief seem isomorphic to religion. For instance, students at St. Cloud State University in Minnesota told me that they try to organize interfaith discussion panels every semester. Another student, a leader who started an affiliate of the Secular Student Alliance at a private Christian college in South Carolina, told me that he helped his group organize an interfaith food drive. He suggested that nonbeliever groups are necessarily concerned with “religion” and ask the same types of questions as religious groups.

While at another student leadership conference in Columbus, Ohio, I met a leader from the University of North Dakota who told me how important it was for him to have his freethinking campus organization recognized during interfaith week. Harvard’s campus group—guided by its high-profile Humanist chaplain, Greg Epstein—takes a strongly interfaith approach. For a time, they even funded an “Interfaith and Community Service Fellow.” Developing their ideas and practices relatively removed from larger and more established nonbeliever organizations, student groups are uniquely willing to experiment with new ideas, and they were less concerned with boundary work than other groups I encountered. Some leaders who work directly with students acknowledged as much in

conversations, and they see campus groups as incubators not only for future leaders of the major organizations, but also for new recruitment strategies.

### **Advocating Nonbelief**

Leaders of national organizations want to avoid explicitly “evangelizing” or “proselytizing,” and they draw boundaries that shape the strategies they adopt. Though several leaders told me anecdotes about how they or the New Atheist authors have converted theists into nonbelievers, they avoid bold attempts at conversion and consciously limit their activities to advocacy of nonbelief and promotion of an actively held nonbeliever identity. During interviews with some leaders, their anxiety about “evangelism” was palpable, and they were adamant that they only try to recruit nonbelievers who have yet to organize as such. For a few, this meant avoiding recruitment altogether and disavowing responsibility for new members. Other leaders clearly enjoy toeing the line and all but winked at me when they told me they were uninterested in converting theists. Despite the diversity of individuals’ boundaries, the public rhetoric of the national nonbeliever organizations is uniform, and they draw a sharp distinction between advocacy and evangelizing.

One of the first groups to launch a major billboard campaign was the United Coalition of Reason, or UnitedCoR. The group began in 2008 when businessman Steve Rade approached the Philadelphia chapter of the American Humanist Association with the idea of founding the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason (PhillyCoR), which would unite all of the local Philadelphia nonbeliever groups. Rade also wanted to fund a billboard to promote the

Coalition, which went up along I-95 near the Philadelphia International Airport. They borrowed the design for their billboard from one created by FreeThoughtAction that went up along I-95 in Ridgefield, New Jersey in January of the same year. It featured a blue sky and a few cumulus clouds, and in white lettering across the top it asked, “Don’t believe in God?” Assuming a dialogue, it responded in the lower right corner: “You are not alone.” In black writing across the bottom, it included a URL for the group’s website and a 1-800 number. The billboard ran through the summer of 2008, and PhillyCoR soon spawned a national organization, UnitedCoR. The latter was incorporated in February of 2009 and hired its executive director the following month.

In addition to billboards, UnitedCoR soon began funding advertisements that run on public transit, inspired in part by the atheist advertising campaign launched on British buses in the fall of 2008.<sup>186</sup> UnitedCoR’s campaigns do more than just advertise nonbelief; they also provide the means for building cooperation between local groups and constructing a national grassroots network of nontheistic communities. Leaders at UnitedCoR start a local coalition by contacting the heads of local groups and gathering them together for a meeting, usually over dinner, with the lure of funding for an advertising campaign. Local groups work together to decide the wording and style of their advertisements, and though they do not have to become a UnitedCoR affiliate, most do.<sup>187</sup> Once organized as a coalition, UnitedCoR suggests they cooperate to organize other events,

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<sup>186</sup> Ariane Sherine, “Op-Ed: Atheists—gimme five,” *The Guardian*, June 20, 2008, available at <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jun/20/transport.religion> (accessed on January 30, 2014).

<sup>187</sup> Reasonable New York, the New York City coalition, is a notable exception. Disagreements among local groups and UnitedCoR resulted in their remaining separate from the national organization.

like a celebration of Darwin Day, the National Day of Reason, the winter solstice, or Banned Books Week. In almost all cases, UnitedCoR offers money for an ad campaign only once, at the time of the coalition's founding. The number of local coalitions grew by thirty percent from July of 2012 to February of 2014, and UnitedCoR now has seventy-four local coalitions in its network, including one in Vancouver.<sup>188</sup>

With roughly 1,400 local nonbeliever organizations in the United States,<sup>189</sup> most metropolitan areas have a range of groups, and UnitedCoR has tried to design its website as a clearinghouse for nonbelievers interested in joining a community. The ads that groups run avoid specific language like "humanist" and "atheist," and UnitedCoR hopes that those who see the ads will seek more information and realize there are many types of groups they can join. In the words of Glen, one of UnitedCoR's leaders:

Not everybody wants an edgy atheist group, but they learn that there are choices. Part of my job is helping people learn that there are choices at the local level. We link to Ethical Culture Societies, and humanist groups, and atheist groups, and skeptic groups, and all different types so that people will have a choice.

One of UnitedCoR's larger aims is to reduce tensions that are common among local and national organizations. To build their trust by showing that they do not fundraise from the same donors, UnitedCoR relies on its own small group of backers and gives all the donations it receives from advertisements to the local groups. UnitedCoR has the endorsement of all of the major nonbeliever organizations in the United States and has begun to expand its initiatives to include conferences, training workshops, events that

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<sup>188</sup> For a current list of coalitions, see UnitedCoR's website: <http://unitedcor.org/>.

<sup>189</sup> Alfredo Garcia and Joseph Blankholm, "The Social Context of Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States," Manuscript under review, 2015.



highlight discrimination against nonbelievers, and ads on satellite radio.

Local groups choose their billboards from a limited set of options. In addition to the background with a blue sky and clouds, they can also choose images of a mountain sunrise or the earth's horizon from space. Two of the three options ask the original billboard's question: "Don't believe in God?" Coalitions can choose to respond, "You are not alone," or with the more sarcastic and in a sense literal, "Join the club." They can also choose a third billboard that asks, "Are you good without God?" and responds, "Millions are." Glen speculated that coalitions with more religious humanists might favor, "Are you good without God?" because "it somehow seems softer, less abstract, not to over-focus on the God issue, but focus on something else." According to Glen, "Sometimes they even ask, 'Why do we have to mention God at all?'" He tells them what he has learned from experience: "Because it doesn't get any attention if you don't."

Glen and UnitedCoR need to strike a careful balance between promotion and provocation, and Glen speaks carefully when describing the goals of their advertising campaigns:

These billboards shouldn't be controversial because they're not even talking to religious people. None of them actually address religious people and say, "Give up your religion," or, "Why do you believe in God? That's a dumb idea." We don't say that. They're not focused on provoking that audience. We know they have that effect. I mean, we're not blind to that. But they shouldn't have that effect because we're not even talking to them. We're talking to our own audience, saying, "Are you one of those people who, like us, doesn't believe in a god and is moral without that belief? Well, here's where to find us. We're over here." That's the message. And that ought not to bother anybody. [...] If you're not one of those people who wants what we have to offer, then look away. It has nothing to do with you.

Glen knows the distinction between promoting and proselytizing is precarious and somewhat in the eye of the beholder, and he and many of the other leaders I spoke to

consider where to draw the line a subject of ongoing debate. For instance, Glen observed that humanists, and especially religious humanists, want to avoid provoking theists and seeming like they want to convert them. They seek to avoid evangelical atheism, and in its attempts to create a broad tent that can accommodate their concerns, so does UnitedCoR.

My interviews and participant observation affirmed Glen's view that religious humanists are generally wary of recruitment and fundraising. When I attended the 2012 annual conference of the American Ethical Union, the umbrella organization for Ethical Culture, I was surprised to find how little they discussed strategies for recruiting new members given that it was such a central concern at the conferences of organizations like the American Humanist Association and the Secular Student Alliance. Workshops covered topics like financial management, creating a warm community, and recruiting and coordinating volunteers. In general, they emphasized a Society's well-being over its growth, and while recruitment was not taboo and even loomed as a concern, it was not a topic of frequent or serious discussion. Even when addressing "social media," leaders in attendance asked whether an Ethical Society should start a Facebook page—not whether it should take out ads on Facebook. During interviews and casual conversations, leaders and members of Societies for Ethical Culture repeatedly emphasized that they want to avoid anything like evangelism, even as they lamented the challenge of finding new members without proselytizing.

### **Secularized or Secularizing?**

Despite promoting atheist evangelism in the pages of *Freethought Today* in 1993,

the Freedom From Religion Foundation has reconsidered the need for preaching the good news of atheism. Bill, one of the organization's leaders whom I quoted above, expressed deep reservations about trying to convert theists and suggested that FFRF's growth might not be due to its own efforts, but rather, the result of a societal transformation. Like all of the leaders I interviewed, Bill observed a sharp increase in the growth of FFRF and other nonbeliever organizations starting in around 2005. While other leaders felt that their organizations have probably played only a minor role in causing this growth, Bill was unique in the amount of credit he gave to a version of the secularization thesis:

There's talk now of the 30 under 30 [30% of Americans under 30 have no religious affiliation]. [...] It's a bottom-up thing. It's organic, like in Europe. The people in Europe didn't become secular because of some top-down organized hierarchy or because some atheist missionaries went over there and started preaching at them. The people just bottom-up, organically just naturally got tired of religion, or just ignored it. [...] So I think we're seeing a little more of that in the United States, whatever this corner is that's being turned, we're seeing, especially among young people, a more natural, spontaneous, bottom-up kind of a movement. A non-movement because everyone in this non-movement is their own leader. And if someone were to step in and say, oh we have a hierarchy. We have a bishop of atheism or a Vatican, then they would all leave. They don't want that. They all want to be individuals. They want to think for themselves.

In this dense bit of interview, Bill links many of the anxieties nonbelievers have about religious pollution. Through a clever act of purification, he uses the secularization thesis to shift the agency for the growth of nonbeliever organizations to something structural, the origin of which is "organic," and "natural, spontaneous, bottom-up." Like Europe, Bill says, the United States is becoming more secular, though without proselytizing and without authoritarian structures. "It's an unusual movement," he told me, "in that it's a movement with no followers."

Sociologists and political scientists agree with Bill that "secularism," in some of its

senses, is on the rise. According to the results of a Pew Research poll released in October of 2012, nearly 20% of American adults have no religious affiliation, an increase of nearly a third since 2007.<sup>190</sup> Those who identify as atheist or agnostic have increased by more than 50% over the same period, now including over 13 million Americans, or nearly 6% of the population. Among adults under 30, 32% have no religious affiliation, a higher percentage than ever before, and a sign that the decline of religious affiliation is likely to continue.

In 2002, Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer published an article observing that the percentage of Americans with no religious affiliation had doubled through the 1990s, jumping from 7% to 14% after remaining relatively stable for the two decades prior.<sup>191</sup> They explained this change in two ways: demographics and politics. Hout and Fischer argued that the growth of the so-called religious “nones” resulted in part from the entry into adulthood of children whose parents had left organized religion in the 1960s. Generational succession thus explains some of the growth because more Americans than ever have been raised with no religion. The second explanation argued that the rise of the Religious Right led political liberals and moderates with weak religious attachments to disavow their religious affiliations. As many Americans came to associate religious identity with conservative politics, they abandoned their religious affiliations, though often without impacting their religious beliefs and other religious practices.

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<sup>190</sup> Cary Funk, Greg Smith, and Luis Lugo, *“Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation* (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012), available at [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/None sOnTheRise-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/None%20OnTheRise-full.pdf), accessed March 25, 2015.

<sup>191</sup> Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67:2 (2002): 165-166.

Hout and Fischer emphasized that what they call “religious skepticism” had little to do with the decline of religious affiliation. Though many refuse to call themselves “religious,” preferring instead to identify as “spiritual,” the majority of the nones continue to pray, as well as believe in God and an afterlife. In 2010, Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert Putnam found that nearly a third of religious nones claim a religious affiliation a year later. They call this group “liminal nones” to describe their intermittent affiliation, and they, too, emphasize that having no religious affiliation does not necessarily mean a change in religious beliefs or practices other than attendance.<sup>192</sup> It remains important, therefore, to distinguish between nonbelievers and the so-called “religious nones.”

Bill is correct that nonbelief and the nones are on the rise, though quantitative social scientists have yet to offer a causal explanation for the growth of nonbelief, and its increase is far less dramatic than that of the religiously unaffiliated.<sup>193</sup> Some leaders I spoke to offered explanations similar to those offered by social scientists, though their timelines differed from that of Hout and Fischer. Many leaders saw the growth of nonbelief, and in

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<sup>192</sup> Chaeyoon Lim, Carol Ann MacGregor, and Robert D. Putnam, “Secular and Liminal: Discovering Heterogeneity Among Religious Nones,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49:4 (2010): 596–618.

<sup>193</sup> The growth in atheism and agnosticism is modest, and polls are inconsistent in their findings. For careful analysis of the available data from the General Social Survey, see Darren Sherkat, “Beyond Belief: Atheism, Agnosticism, and Theistic Certainty in the United States,” *Sociological Spectrum* 28 (2008): 438-459. For an analysis that incorporates data from the American Religious Identification Survey, see Ariela Keysar, “Shifts Along the American Religion-Secular Spectrum,” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 3:1 (2014): 1-16. More recently, Sherkat has argued that growth in belief in a non-agentive higher power is a symptom of the declining hold of “Abrahamic” religion; see Sherkat, *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans’ Shifting Religious Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 2014).

particular of nonbeliever organizations, as partly the result of the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001 and the election of George W. Bush as President in 2000 and 2004. Activists discuss these causes among themselves, both in person, at their annual conferences and organizational meetings, as well as in writing, by reading and commenting on each other's books, articles, blog posts, and Facebook status updates. Summing up much of the causal speculation up through its publication, David Niose published *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* in the summer of 2012.<sup>194</sup> Niose is the current President of the Secular Coalition for America, the former President of the American Humanist Association, and the lead attorney in a lawsuit challenging the inclusion of "under God" in the recitation of the Pledge of Allegiance in Massachusetts public schools.

Niose echoes other activists in viewing 9/11 and the George W. Bush elections as turning points: "Many commentators have noted that the presidency of George W. Bush was the best thing that ever happened for organized secularism in America."<sup>195</sup> Writing a brief history of the Secular Coalition, he situates its founding "in the atmosphere of post-September 11," and extends this observation by crediting 9/11 with spurring Sam Harris to write *The End of Faith*, giving rise to the New Atheism.<sup>196</sup> In turn, Niose views the New Atheism's popularity, especially on the internet, with aiding the growth of nonbeliever organizations.<sup>197</sup> Ben, a leader at a prominent atheist organization, agreed on this point, as well, arguing that the growth of the internet helped nonbelievers feel like they were no

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<sup>194</sup> David Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>195</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, 130, 139.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

longer alone, thus empowering them to organize, both online and in physical communities. Niose also credits the activism and advertising campaigns of the organizations with which he is most closely affiliated, the Secular Coalition and the American Humanist Association, with aiding “the emergence of Secular Americans.”<sup>198</sup> In Niose’s narrative, larger forces have given rise to a secular demographic, but secular activists must take advantage of this mass exodus by rhetorically crafting a “Secular” (capital-S) identity and movement committed to opposing the Religious Right.

Though Niose writes that he “would be pleased to see humanist centers springing up across the country,” he remains apprehensive because “the reality is that many no longer find the traditional benefits of religious communities relevant in modern society.”<sup>199</sup> Several leaders with whom I spoke disagree. During independent interviews, two leaders of the Humanist Community at Harvard (HCH) quoted political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell’s 2010 book *American Grace* in order to frame the opportunity they want to seize. One of the leaders is worth quoting at length because he not only explains the need for communities of nonbelievers, but he also describes one of the many complex entanglements of secular activists and scholars who study the secular:<sup>200</sup>

Very influential in my thinking has been Robert Putnam and his sociological work on social capital. [...] He’s rather conservative in his views, frankly, but I started reading his work, particularly his big work studying American religious life, called *American Grace*, and basically, I was convinced by his argument. He found, and this really stuck with me, that people who are religious give more of their money to charity, they volunteer more of their time, they give their organs and blood more

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<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 132-138.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 207.

<sup>200</sup> I borrow this notion of entanglements from Courtney Bender, “Things in Their Entanglements,” in *The Post-Secular in Question*, ed. Philip S. Gorski et al. (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 43-76.

frequently, they vote more frequently, they run for office more frequently, they're generally more engaged, civically speaking, and also, according to him, they're just nicer to people in the sense that they're more willing to help someone with their groceries, they're more willing to help someone cross the road, this sort of thing. And I read that, I was like, hmm. Then he breaks down the data, and he says, but this isn't correlated with intensity of religious belief. It's not about their faith belief. He found that if people were less religious but for whatever reason they went frequently to religious communities, they displayed the same civic benefits that very religious people did. If people were really religious but they were basically a hermit, they didn't. And so he said this doesn't seem to be about religious belief, but it seems to be about moral communities. And he says, and this is a direct quote, I think, "Morally intense, non-religious social networks could have a similarly powerful effect."<sup>201</sup> I think that's the quote. But, he goes on to say, there are too few of them to study. And I read that, and I thought, that's the problem with the humanist movement. We don't have morally intense, non-religious social networks. [...] This is a decades-long process. This is not going to happen until I'm an old man. If people really take this seriously and start building these communities, what we're looking at in maybe thirty or forty years, we'll have a network of thriving humanist community centers in major cities across America, which have some political clout because they have large memberships.

The leaders of HCH understand that the percentage of Americans who have no religious affiliation and who consider themselves atheist or agnostic are all on the rise. They recognize this growth as an opportunity, albeit one that they worry they might fail to realize.

In late 2012, HCH began a partnership with the American Humanist Association called the Humanist Community Project, "a Cambridge-based initiative to help create, establish, and connect a stronger nationwide network of Humanist communities focused on individual, group, and societal betterment, for the benefit of the secular and freethought

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<sup>201</sup> Putnam and Campbell write, "Perhaps close, morally intense, but nonreligious social networks could have a similarly powerful effect. [...] We cannot exclude that possibility, because we have not found a significant number of such groups nationwide to study. While we cannot deny that secular equivalents of religiously based social networks might exist, we are confident that in America today religious institutions represent by far the most common site of such communities." Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2010), 361.



movement.”<sup>202</sup> Funding for the initiative supports an annual conference, as well as the development of materials aimed at supporting local groups. In early 2014, HCH hired Jesse Galef as the first “National Community Coordinator” for the Humanist Community Project. Galef was formerly the Communications Director for the Secular Student Alliance, a Columbus, Ohio-based organization that supports campus organizations in much the same way that the Humanist Community Project seeks to support other local groups.

In a press release announcing his hiring, Galef shared the vision of other HCH leaders I interviewed: “We need to see the groundswell of young secular Americans as an opportunity, not a victory. If churches aren’t serving their real human needs, we need to develop communities that can. Society will be shaped by where these millions of Americans go next.” Leaders at HCH and the other major nonbeliever organizations are caught within a matrix of boundaries and rhetorical necessity as they both claim and disavow credit for the growing number of organized nonbelievers in the United States. While some, like Bill, use secularization narratives to cleanse their hands of religious pollution, others like Niose see themselves playing active roles as agents of secularization. Still others, like the leaders at HCH, do not believe they can make more Americans “secular,” but rather, see the growth of the religiously unaffiliated and nonbelievers as opportunities to make more *organized* nonbelievers. They consider themselves a small piece in the larger restructuring of American religion.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>202</sup> <http://americanhumanist.org/news/details/2012-11-the-humanist-community-project-aha-hch-partnership-a>

<sup>203</sup> I borrow this phrase from Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

### **Conclusion: Purification and Hybridity**

This chapter has focused largely on religious pollution, which offers a way to understand how and why nonbelievers construct, debate, and reconstruct their boundaries. As organizations' allergies to religious pollution vary, so do their attempts to purify themselves. By constructing a variety of secular/religious frameworks in which religion can be spurned, embraced, or translated, organizations offer particular ways of being secular, which become the available options for secular Americans who want to organize as such. Moreover, as each organization pursues its own understanding of how to be secular in its attempts to lobby the government and pursue lawsuits, it influences and participates in the reconstruction of wider American understandings of the secular and secularism. The next chapter will complicate the landscape of American nonbelief still further by returning to the kinds of organizations introduced at the outset of this chapter: hybrid forms that self-consciously combine elements of the secular and the religious. By purifying certain elements, by producing analogues or substitutes, or by embracing certain forms of religion that they find acceptable, nonbelievers create ways of believing, behaving, and belonging that challenge the very possibility of drawing a distinction between the secular and the religious.

## CHAPTER 2: Secular Religion and Other Hybrids

The aim of this chapter is to explain why some contemporary organized nonbelievers consider themselves religious. Their religiosity straddles a divide—between the secular and the religious—that is both historical and symbolic. It is an inheritance that marks them as artifacts of an era in which other frameworks prevailed—in which the secular and the religious were not necessarily opposed. It is also an *ex post facto* attempt at reunification. “Secular religions” are both antiquated and a symptom of a contemporary turn increasingly understood as “post-secular.”<sup>204</sup> Organized nonbelievers who consider themselves religious or consider their organizations to be *like* religion preserve and reassert a hybridity that denies the secular/religious divide. The last chapter examined the ways in which America’s organized nonbelievers delimit the boundary between the secular and the religious and purify the former of the latter. This chapter surveys contemporary secular religious hybrids in the United States, with a focus on organized nonbelievers who consider themselves religious. It also considers attempts to create secular substitutes that

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<sup>204</sup> On secular religions, see D.G. Charlton, *Secular Religions in France: 1815-1870* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963); Andrew Wernick, *Auguste Comte and the Religion of Humanity: The Post-Theistic Program of French Social Theory* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003). On the post-secular, see Jürgen Habermas, “Notes on Post-Secular Society,” *Sight and Sight*, June 18, 2008, accessed April 2, 2015, <http://www.signandsight.com/features/1714.html>; Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen, *The Post-Secular in Question: Religion in Contemporary Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2012); Birgitte Schepelern Johansen, “Post-secular sociology: Modes, possibilities, challenges,” *Approaching Religion* 3:1 (June 2013): 4-15; Rosi Braidotti, “In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 25:6 (2008): 1-24. For critical responses to “the postsecular turn,” see Gregor McLennan, “The Postsecular Turn,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 27:4 (2010): 3-20; James A. Beckford, “SSSR Presidential Address: Public Religions and the Postsecular: Critical Reflections,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51:1 (2012): 1-19.

are self-consciously *like* religion, but which are avowedly secular. Not without anxiety, these hybrid organizations embrace religion in one or more senses, and in so doing, they challenge any simple understanding of what it means to be secular or religious in America today.

This chapter begins its survey where the last chapter left off: with the Humanist Community at Harvard (HCH). While in one perspective HCH is playing an innovative role in the emergence of what some have called “congregational humanism,” seen another way, HCH is reasserting the inheritance from which it arose.<sup>205</sup> Understanding HCH means looking at the roughly century-old tradition of religious humanism and tracing the various threads that have led to contemporary humanist organizations creating partnerships they had once avoided. Though the American Humanist Association has remained continuously active since its founding in 1941, other organizations like the Humanist Society of Friends and the Fellowship of Religious Humanists have morphed into new iterations with changes in leadership and shifting partnerships. Though HCH is undeniably breaking new ground, its efforts bear a strong resemblance to those of the founders of religious humanism.

I turn next to two movements that have also made significant contributions to the humanist tradition: Ethical Culture and Humanistic Judaism. Though the former antedates organized humanism, it shares its precursors, and at times, Ethical Culture and humanism have become indistinguishable. Though Humanistic Judaism arose nearly a century after Ethical Culture, it did so for similar reasons. Like Felix Adler before him, Rabbi Sherwin Wine broke from Reform Judaism, founding in the mid-1960s what he would later call

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<sup>205</sup> Tom Flynn uses this term. See his introduction to a special section on religious humanism in *Free Inquiry* 33:6 (October/November 2013): 18-19.

“Judaism beyond God.”<sup>206</sup> Near the end of his life, Wine trained Harvard’s current humanist chaplain, Greg Epstein, who expanded the chaplaincy into a wide-ranging set of initiatives within just a few years of his arrival. HCH not only partners with the historically important American Humanist Association, but through Epstein’s leadership and through the influence of his collaborator, James Croft, HCH self-consciously borrows from the traditions of Humanistic Judaism and Ethical Culture.

Paul Kurtz’s founding of the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980 marked a break from older forms of humanism and promoted a new kind of division within humanism itself. Though “secular humanism” was not entirely novel at the time of Kurtz’s appropriation, it existed mostly in the imagination of the newly organized Religious Right as a name for a pervasive non- and anti-religious worldview in the United States. This section sketches a genealogy of secular humanism and observes the ways in which Kurtz attempted to purify humanism of the religious analogically. Though Kurtz’s self-conscious attempts to create secular humanist communities and a system of ethics mirrored the efforts of the religious humanists who preceded him, he employed various strategies to distance his work from what he viewed as the harmful effects of religion. With an influx of new leadership and with Kurtz’s death, the Center for Inquiry has begun to partner with organizations it once held at arm’s length or even aggressively attempted to annex. Though the divisions within organized humanism are far from being erased, growing cooperation among various humanist organizations gestures toward an older, undivided humanism. Leaders at HCH have made this gesture explicit, though they are hardly the first to suggest

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<sup>206</sup> Sherwin Wine, *Judaism Beyond God* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1985).

dropping the qualifiers “religious” and “secular” to promote unification. I conclude by considering a number of ways in which leaders of nonbeliever organizations minimize the differences between the terms in the nonbeliever constellation.

### **Humanism, New and Old**

The aim of the following sections on humanism is not to provide a complete intellectual and institutional history, but rather, to provide an overview of the touchstones to which contemporary organized humanists turn when constructing the boundaries of their tradition. Humanism is a polysemous term, and much like “secular” and “secularism,” that polysemy can work to the advantage of those who employ it.<sup>207</sup> By locating the origins of humanism in certain times and places, and by incorporating or excluding particular concepts and figures, humanists create different kinds of “humanism.” In turn, these varieties of humanism can lay claim to the tradition’s authority and argue for the inclusion or exclusion of specific ways of being humanist.

Humanism is not only a tradition, but also a break—from the Unitarian Church, from nineteenth-century nonbeliever movements, from Reform Judaism, and as the Platform talk quoted at the beginning of the first chapter showed, from the *bad* kind of religion. It breaks with the authority of the institutions from which it springs at the same time that it reaches backwards into the recent and ancient past that it claims for itself. Humanism is, in many

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<sup>207</sup> For a discussion of the political advantages of a polysemous secular, see chapter four of this dissertation and Joseph Blankholm, “The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53:4 (December 2014): 775-790. See also Charles Taylor, “The Polysemy of the Secular,” *Social Research* 76:4 (2009): 1143-1176.

ways, what Eric Hobsbawm has called an “invented tradition”:

[A] set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past.<sup>208</sup>

Humanism belongs to a lineage of traditions that are suspicious of inherited practice, including deism and avowed atheism, but also stretching from the Lutheran and English Reformations, through Congregationalism to Unitarianism.<sup>209</sup> It borrows from these traditions, but it also modifies their practices to make them new and discourages some forms of belief and practice altogether. The ancient past, and in particular pre-Socratic Greece, provides a link to intellectual practices rather than material ones. Humanism encourages the affirmation of certain ontologies and epistemologies rather than others, and it understands itself as drawing from ancient philosophy in doing so. Like other “invented traditions” and many other “new religious movements,” it creates continuity with what is “old” in order to create something “new.”<sup>210</sup>

For Hobsbawm, the past 200 years have been especially ripe for the invention of

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<sup>208</sup> Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Traditions,” in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 1.

<sup>209</sup> For a study that connects narratives of disenchantment from the ancient world through the nineteenth century, with a focus on the English Reformation’s reappropriation in colonial India, see Robert Yelle, *The Language of Disenchantment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013). For a study that connects deism to liberal democracy and contemporary forms of secularism, see Simon Critchley, *Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (New York: Verso, 2012).

<sup>210</sup> See James R. Lewis and Olav Hammer, eds., *The Invention of Sacred Tradition* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). For a critical discussion of the term “invented” in the context of religions and traditions, see the introduction to Carole M. Cusack’s *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, and Faith* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2010).

traditions because the Industrial Revolution has reshaped material conditions such that "old traditions and their institutional carriers and promulgators no longer prove sufficiently adaptable and flexible, or are otherwise eliminated."<sup>211</sup> His modernization narrative resembles that of humanism's founders, who argued that early twentieth-century religious institutions and beliefs had fallen out of step with the demands of modern life.

Hobsbawm continues:

[I]t seems clear that, in spite of much invention, new traditions have not filled more than a small part of the space left by the secular decline of both old tradition and custom; as might indeed be expected in societies in which the past becomes increasingly less relevant as a model or precedent for most forms of human behavior.<sup>212</sup>

Hobsbawm's secularization narrative tells a story of subtraction and loss, in Charles Taylor's terms,<sup>213</sup> in which the "functions" of outmoded religion must be replaced by secular equivalents because demand (i.e., a "space") remains. The language of functionalism is one that Auguste Comte and Émile Durkheim developed for the purposes of sociology, and as I demonstrate in the pages that follow, Comte lies at the origins of humanism, and his "Religion of Humanity" is its etymological source. Functionalism, in turn, enables the analogizing project of humanists like Paul Kurtz, who seek to emulate religion's functions while purifying them of their essentially religious character. As so often occurs in the study of the secular, the methods of inquiry have shined a light on their own origins, and the researcher has become entangled with the researched.<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," 4-5.

<sup>212</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>213</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2007).

<sup>214</sup> On "mutual entanglements," see Courtney Bender, *The New Metaphysicals: Spirituality and the American Religious Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).



The problem of entanglement lies at the heart of any inquiry into the history of humanism, as it does for other invented traditions. Turning again to Hobsbawm, "For all invented traditions, so far as possible, use history as a legitimator of action and cement of group cohesion. Frequently it becomes the actual symbol of struggle."<sup>215</sup> Yet as Hobsbawm also shows, this is not a dilemma particular to "invented traditions" so much as one particular to the production of history:

Yet all historians, whatever else their objectives, are engaged in this process inasmuch as they contribute, consciously or not, to the creation, dismantling and restructuring of images of the past which belong not only to the world of specialist investigation but to the public sphere of man as a political being. They might as well be aware of this dimension of their activities.<sup>216</sup>

The relationship of the history I offer below to the history of humanism is no different from that of any other historian's relationship to a particular tradition, though throughout this chapter I take Hobsbawm's desultory prompt of self-awareness seriously.

Writing in *Varieties of Unbelief*, her excellent history of English nonbelievers, Susan Budd describes the ways in which humanists fashion their tradition: "In short, like other social movements [humanism] encapsulated history, choosing from the history both of Western civilization and of itself that which explained its present form."<sup>217</sup> Budd reduces the diversity of "humanism" to the singular, creating a scholarly umbrella category and using the term anachronistically as she looks back into the nineteenth century. (In fairness, "nonbelievers" provides me with a similarly imperfect placeholder.) Because she is conscious of the need for an expedient term, and because she knows that no term can

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<sup>215</sup> Hobsbawm, "Inventing Traditions," 12.

<sup>216</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>217</sup> Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society, 1850-1960* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1977), 256.

suitably capture what she calls the varieties of unbelief, Budd chooses “humanism” deliberately, working in reverse from the avowedly humanist groups that came to prevail in her contemporary Britain in the 1960s and 70s.<sup>218</sup> She attends carefully to the myriad disagreements among rationalists, secularists, atheists, and agnostics, naming them with the terms that they used to describe themselves, and even observing specific moments when “humanism” emerged in their lexicon and became synonymous with other key terms.<sup>219</sup> Yet by using “humanism” as an umbrella category, she also participates in the project of the humanist groups that lent her their archival resources, who look to the past through the present and see themselves in the future toward which it leads.<sup>220</sup>

In the present discussion I share Budd’s dilemma. By including or excluding certain understandings and by pointing to antecedents like secularism and free religion, I necessarily participate in the fashioning of a particular understanding of humanism. Moreover, I am only focused on the nontheistic strain of humanism that plays a pivotal role in the development of the present-day nonbeliever organizations at the core of my study. Christian humanism and the wide variety of projects deemed “humanistic” over the past

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<sup>218</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., vi. For an explanation of “the whig interpretation of history” and its reception into historiography as “present-centered history,” see Adrian Wilson and T.G. Ashplant, “Whig History and Present-Centred History,” *The Historical Journal*, 31:1 (1988): 1-16. Also see the original essay that coined the phrase: Herbert Butterfield, *The whig interpretation of history* (London, 1931). For a discussion of the problem of present-centered history in the historiography of atheism and other forms of nonbelief, see David Wootton, “New Histories of Atheism,” *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*, ed. by Michael Hunter and David Wootton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 13-53.

two centuries lie beyond my scope.<sup>221</sup> To mitigate my own constructive role and to remain attendant to humanism's ongoing reconstruction, I trace its genealogy in large part through the perspectives of those debating its boundaries. The following sections on humanism narrate a description of its contemporary construction more than they argue for its authentic lineage. Indeed, they call into question the possibility of locating such a lineage and perform another kind of argument, namely, that humanism is multiple, contested, and always undergoing revision. These sections maintain an eye to this complicated process of reconstruction as they survey humanism in its polysemy.<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>221</sup> "Christian humanism" and other humanisms await their own genealogies. Given the work it accomplishes in linking contexts and figures as disparate as ancient Greece, the Italian Renaissance, Erasmus, Puritans, human rights discourse, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Jacques Maritain, there is surprisingly no critical investigation of the category of Christian humanism. For touchstones, see Margo Todd, *Christian Humanism and the Puritan Social Order* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Alasdair A. MacDonald, Zweder R.W.M. von Martels, and Jan R. Veenstra, eds., *Christian Humanism: Essays in Honor of Arjo Vanderjagt* (Boston: Brill 2009); Reinhold Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and Humanism," a lecture at Union Theological Seminary in 1952; Jacques Maritain, *Les droits de l'homme et la loi naturelle* (New York: Éditions de la Maison Française, 1942) and "Christian Humanism," *Fortune* 30:4 (April 1942): 106-7, 160-168. The guiding question of such a genealogy should be, "When did 'Christian humanism' become a salient category, and how has the work it accomplishes for those who use it changed since it was first employed?"

<sup>222</sup> In 1973, when Paul Kurtz was still editor of *The Humanist* and on the board of directors of the American Humanist Association and the International Humanist and Ethical Union, he edited a volume that collected more than thirty essays aimed at defining humanism. The contributors were a mix of scholars and leaders of nonbeliever organizations and included the psychologist B.F. Skinner, the philosophers Roy Wood Sellars and Sidney Hook, and former eds. of *The Humanist*, Edwin H. Wilson and Khoren Arisian. The volume attests to many of the debates that prevailed among humanists and other nonbelievers in the early 1970s, and it presages Kurtz's departure from the American Humanist Association and his creation of organized secular humanism. Kurtz, ed., *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973).

## Congregational Humanism: Religious nor Secular

In a special section of the October/November 2013 issue of *Free Inquiry* magazine, Harvard humanist chaplain Greg Epstein and former HCH research and education fellow James Croft called for an end to the distinction between religious and secular humanism:

The attempt to distinguish between religious Humanism and secular humanism<sup>223</sup>... perpetuates the idea that there is something substantively different in the humanism that these two groups seek to promote. Yet this has been proven over time to not be the case: today, the values of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis (a bastion of religious humanism) are hardly distinguishable from those of the Center for Inquiry (the most prominent proponent of secular humanism). [...] We are one movement, reaching toward one humanism, and for this reason we prefer to avoid the term religious and move on from an old, unhelpful dichotomy between “religious” and “secular” humanism.<sup>224</sup>

Croft and Epstein want to build “godless congregations” throughout the United States. These communities, they argue, “represent the best chance for humanism to grow into a mass movement able to have an impact on the broader culture.”<sup>225</sup> Their article is a kind of manifesto for this movement, which they acknowledge is not altogether new: “The idea of a godless congregation has existed for a long time and in some cases has been extremely successful. This is not a new concept, and ‘religious Humanists’ have been—and are still—doing much that newer godless congregations can learn from.”<sup>226</sup>

Despite the debt they owe their religiously humanist forebears, the pair remains

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<sup>223</sup> Tom Flynn, the editor of *Free Inquiry*, argues that religious humanism should be capitalized because it is a religion, whereas unqualified humanism and secular humanism are not religions and should remain uncapitalized. The capital letter, in his view, emphasizes the distinction. Because the aim of this chapter is to show that such a distinction matters from certain perspectives but not from others, I do not follow his usage. See Flynn, “Introduction,” 22.

<sup>224</sup> Greg Epstein and James Croft, “The Godless Congregation: An Idea Whose Time Has Come,” *Free Inquiry* 33:6 (2013): 25.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

wary of the term “religious” because they believe it confuses potential joiners and “carries undesirable connotations that godless congregations hope to avoid.”<sup>227</sup> Echoing the anxieties about religious pollution discussed at length in the previous chapter, they see “traditional religion” as having a “tendency toward dogmatism, authoritarianism, groupthink, and rigid hierarchies,” which are “all things the godless congregation seeks strenuously to counter.”<sup>228</sup> The “religious” remains dangerous for “Congregational humanism” and “godless congregations.” Dropping the term from their self-descriptions is a way to purify themselves of its harmful implications if not actual harms.

From a perspective that sees congregations as religious and a lack of belief in God as secular, Croft and Epstein’s “godless congregations” are secular/religious hybrids; they are both/and. From their own perspective, they are humanists unqualified by the adjectives “religious” or “secular” as they attempt to move beyond them; they are neither/nor. “Times have changed,” they write, “the culture has moved on, and old categories no longer fit the current reality of our lives.”<sup>229</sup> Epstein and Croft are, in a sense, mending the divide, though they attempt to do so by denying it altogether. Though some scholars would call such attempts at suturing the secular and religious “post-secular,” I disagree. If the post-secular describes a condition in which the separation between the secular and the religious is no longer possible or accepted, then this chapter questions the possibility of the post-secular

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<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Ibid.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid. There is a very real sense in which this sentence is a pithy starting point for my entire study. The boundary between the secular and the religious has shifted over time, and this dissertation charts responses to those shifts. The contemporary landscape of nonbeliever organizations provides an overview of these responses, and conflicts among the groups are symptomatic of the plural ways of imagining the relationship between secular and religious.

by supplying ample evidence of a religious humanism that has been continuously available throughout the twentieth century and into the twenty-first. The prefix of this definition of the post-secular becomes an oxymoron in light of the history of the secular. A seemingly post-secular condition was always already present, at very least in the form of religious humanism, but certainly also in other kinds of secular religious hybrids.

If the post-secular is the seemingly growing sense that a division between the secular and the religious is untenable—for instance, as argued by Epstein and Croft—then such a view is not without its detractors. For those who desire to purify themselves of the religious, the secular must not only be separate but also separable. Furthermore, as I argue in the third and fourth chapters of this dissertation, the United States government and its tiered system of courts depend on such a distinction in order to carry out their day-to-day business because “religion” continues to remain “special,” i.e., distinct from the “secular.”<sup>230</sup> Even Tom Flynn, the editor of *Free Inquiry*, who hosted Epstein and Croft’s article along with a number of others in a special issue on religious humanism, believes fully in the importance of maintaining a division.

Flynn, who is executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism (formerly the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism), speaks both for and to many secular humanists through *Free Inquiry*, the flagship journal of the largest secular humanist organization in the country, the Center for Inquiry. His tolerance of what he calls “congregational humanism” stops short of acceptance, and he still draws a sharp

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<sup>230</sup> For a study of the specialness of religion in the eyes of the courts and the consequences of that specialness, see Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

distinction between his own secular humanism and religious and congregational humanism. He offers “a lighthearted example” of why some choose the former and others the latter: “Imagine prodding a roomful of humanists to sing ‘Amazing Grace’ in unison. Those who lean religious *or* congregational will have a grand old time; those who lean secular will feel sullied.”<sup>231</sup> With this final word, “sullied,” Flynn refers directly, if not intentionally, to religious pollution. Because he and many other secular humanists want their humanism pure of religion, those humanists who embrace “religion” or “congregations” fail to achieve what Flynn calls “real secularism.”<sup>232</sup>

### **The Humanist Tradition**

In the opening pages of his history of organized religious humanism in the United States, Mason Olds distinguishes the object of his study from other types of humanism, observing that “a kind of ambiguity surrounds the subject.”<sup>233</sup> He identifies five varieties: Greek, Renaissance, Literary, Nietzschean, and Naturalistic. Though he positions religious humanism in relation to all five, he considers the “naturalistic” strain to be its closest relative—indeed, its parent. This section uses Olds’ taxonomy as a basic framework for introducing the range of periods and thinkers that humanists include in various understandings of their tradition. Olds’ typology of humanism is not exhaustive, though it provides an overview of some of the most salient understandings of the term, and it reveals how one of the only historians of nontheistic humanism—himself a practicing religious

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<sup>231</sup> Flynn, “Introduction,” 19.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>233</sup> Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism* (Minneapolis: Fellowship of Religious Humanists, 1996), 3.

humanist—imagines the boundaries of his tradition. Alongside Olds, I offer the perspectives of other humanists who have written histories and systematic philosophies of humanism. By aggregating perspectives, this section both surveys the historiography of humanism and distinguishes that which becomes organized humanism from its homophonous cognates.

The first type of humanism that Olds identifies is that of ancient Greece. In A.C. Grayling's interview with Stephen Colbert discussed in the previous chapter, Grayling connected ancient Greek humanism to that of the present, arguing for its historical primacy as a 2,500-year-old tradition that predates Christianity. Grayling is hardly the first to argue for this long history.<sup>234</sup> Charles Francis Potter, one of the founders of organized humanism and author of one of its seminal texts, *Humanism: A New Religion*, argues for the same source: "It is from the Greek Humanists... and through the Renaissance, that modern western Humanism derives."<sup>235</sup> At times Potter is careful to distinguish ancient Greek philosophers as "forerunners" of later humanism, implying that they are not humanists in the modern sense, but are linked through a cognate with a similar yet different meaning.<sup>236</sup> Yet just a few pages later, he is unequivocal: "In Protagoras we discover a real Humanist. His famous sentence, 'Man is the measure of all things,' was the Emancipation Proclamation

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<sup>234</sup> See, for instance, Vern L. Bullough, "Humanism," in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 402-405. See also Fred Edwards' excellent overview of humanism on the American Humanist Association's website: "What Is Humanism?" *American Humanist Association*, [http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/What\\_is\\_Humanism](http://americanhumanist.org/Humanism/What_is_Humanism), accessed August 15, 2014.

<sup>235</sup> Charles Francis Potter, *Humanism: A New Religion* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1930), 63-64. Quoted in Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 3.

<sup>236</sup> Potter, *Humanism*, 61.



of the human race.”<sup>237</sup>

It is this sort of slippage that Olds seeks to correct. He acknowledges that many religious humanists trace “their spiritual ancestry” to pre-Socratic Greek philosophy, but he argues that in thinkers like Anaxagoras, Protagoras, and Democritus, humanists find only the “embryonic” form of their interests in science, skepticism, and human-centered ethics.<sup>238</sup> Reflecting on Potter and the other founders of religious humanism, he writes, “[They] were not seeking a new orthodoxy in Greek humanism; rather, they saw the Greeks as having had the questioning, adventurous spirit they exemplified in their own age.”<sup>239</sup> Olds does not fully relinquish a connection to the so-called “humanism” of ancient Greece, though he tempers stronger claims of continuity like those of Potter and mid-twentieth-century humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont.<sup>240</sup> Labeling certain ancient Greeks as “humanists” appears to have its own intellectual history, though I am unaware of any attempts to systematically sketch it.<sup>241</sup>

Creating a link to ancient Greece aids another potential slippage with Renaissance Humanism, a European intellectual movement spurred and defined by the fourteenth

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<sup>237</sup> Potter, *Humanism*, 67.

<sup>238</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 3.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>240</sup> Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington D.C.: Humanist Press, 1997).

<sup>241</sup> See, for example, the tentative opening line of N.W. DeWitt’s article “Greek Humanism,” in which he deploys an anachronistic understanding of the term: “Humanism may be crudely defined for the present purpose as a system of thought in which the interests of mankind are the chief concern, and a social system of which mankind shall be the chief beneficiary.” Dewitt, “Greek Humanism,” *The Classical Journal*, Vol. 28, No. 5 (1933), 263-270. “Greek humanism” receives book-length treatment by one of Corliss Lamont’s colleagues at Columbia University; see Moses Hadas, *Humanism: The Greek Ideal and Its Survival* (New York: Harper, 1960).

century rediscovery of works from Greek and Roman antiquity. According to Renaissance scholar Paul Oskar Kristeller, humanism as an -ism was introduced in the early nineteenth century as a variant of the term, "humanist," which was coined a little more than three hundred years prior "to designate a teacher and student of the 'humanities' or *studia humanitatis*."<sup>242</sup> As it was first used, humanism described "devotion to the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome, and the humane values that may be derived from them."<sup>243</sup> This remains the understanding that organizes the scholarly study of Renaissance humanism.

John H. Dietrich, who along with Potter and others founded organized humanism in the 1920s, considered his movement to be "a lineal descendant of Renaissance Humanism."<sup>244</sup> For Potter, some Renaissance "Humanists" were only so "in the sense of being passionately devoted to the new learning... interested more in collecting manuscripts of the Greek and Latin classics than in contributing to the thought of their time." To these figures he contrasts men like Lorenzo Valla and Pomponazzi, whom he describes using terms such as "rationalist," "somewhat of a freethinker," and "unbeliever."<sup>245</sup> Both Dietrich and Potter find their own humanist ideas in ancient Greek thought, and in turn, they see these ideas revived and transmitted to them only through the rediscovery of texts from ancient Greece and Rome. They imply a chain of transmission, though they do not trace

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<sup>242</sup> Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Humanism," in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, ed. Charles B. Schmidt, Quentin Skinner, Eckhard Kessler, and Jill Kraye (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 113.

<sup>243</sup> Nicholas Mann, "The Origins of Humanism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Renaissance Humanism*, Jill Kraye, ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 1-2.

<sup>244</sup> John H. Dietrich, *Humanism* (Boston: American Unitarian Association, 1934), 6. Quoted in Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 4.

<sup>245</sup> Potter, *Humanism*, 70-72.

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In reconstructing the relationship between religious and Renaissance humanism, Olds draws primarily from Potter and Dietrich. He builds on the former's praise and criticism for certain Renaissance humanists whom he credits with "enjoying this life to the full, developing well-rounded personalities, getting away from the religious control of knowledge, and using textual and historical criticism for studying religious documents."<sup>247</sup> Yet Olds also considers Renaissance humanists "aristocratic" and insufficiently "enthusiastic about the embryonic sciences." They were unlike the "democratically inclined" religious humanists of the twentieth century, who "embraced science and the scientific method as the means for arriving at truth." In this view, contemporary humanism is both indebted to a pre-Socratic Greece uncorrupted by "Plato and the Neo-Platonists," and also oriented toward a modern, democratic society thoroughly shaped by science.<sup>248</sup> Olds and other humanists construct an ideal tradition by carefully affirming the appropriate antecedents and discarding others.

Writing in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, Vern L. Bullough considers Renaissance humanism "the new humanism," in contrast to that which he finds in ancient Greece: "In this context [in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries], humanism emphasized what we now call the humanities, but also included elements of the earlier humanism, including a

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<sup>246</sup> For an example of a work that does partially trace this lineage of reception through the rediscovery of manuscripts, see Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2011). For a more sweeping synthesis organized as a history of "atheism" and its transmission, see Georges Minois, *Histoire de l'athéisme: les incroyants dans le monde occidental des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1998).

<sup>247</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 5.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

sort of skepticism that promoted a willingness to challenge church doctrine.”<sup>249</sup> Bullough is a former president of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and one of the founders of the Council for Secular Humanism.<sup>250</sup> The *Encyclopedia* in which Bullough’s entry appears is edited by Tom Flynn, executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism and editor of *Free Inquiry* magazine. Now in its second edition, the *Encyclopedia* is published by Prometheus Books, a publishing house founded by Paul Kurtz, the SUNY-Buffalo philosophy professor who first institutionalized secular humanism by spearheading the creation of the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980.<sup>251</sup> The volume’s list of contributors is a who’s who of prominent organized nonbelievers and secular activists in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. The authority of the *Encyclopedia* and Bullough’s institutional credentials give weight to his efforts to pick and choose among humanisms and their characteristics.

Flynn, and until his death, Kurtz, have been the primary historical and philosophical advocates of explicitly secular humanism, which defines itself in opposition to its religious forebears. Yet they share with the avowedly religious Potter and Dietrich a long view of the tradition’s history.<sup>252</sup> Though the meaning of the term that prevails among scholars of the Renaissance does not match their own, they find room for consonance through certain figures and through ideas they associate with the development of skepticism, science,

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<sup>249</sup> Vern L. Bullough, “Humanism,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 403.

<sup>250</sup> *Ibid.*, ii.

<sup>251</sup> The organization’s name was shortened to the Council for Secular Humanism in 1996.

<sup>252</sup> For example, see Kurtz, *A Secular Humanist Declaration* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1980), 7-8 and Kurtz, “Epilogue: Is Everyone a Humanist?” in *The Humanist Alternative: Some Definitions of Humanism*, 186 (173-186).

anticlericalism, and a rejection of the supernatural. The polysemy of “humanism” aids humanists in imagining their movement as the culmination of more than two thousand years of wisdom. Inasmuch as their version of “humanism” gains discursive traction, it competes with and remakes other understandings of the term. Olds, Bullough, Flynn, and Kurtz have deeply influenced the ongoing reconstruction of the humanist tradition.

The third form that Olds identifies is “Literary Humanism,” an early twentieth century movement associated with the intellectuals Norman Foerster, Paul Elmer More, and Irving Babbitt.<sup>253</sup> Because it developed contemporaneously with religious humanism, Potter and others sought to clarify their differences.<sup>254</sup> Babbitt’s “humanism,” often called the new humanism by literary scholars, is concerned with the humanities and the kind of character their study imparts. The humanist is a “gentleman” who values “poised and proportionate living.” The “humanistic virtues” are “moderation, common sense, and common decency.” The “higher will” can and should keep the “natural man” in check.<sup>255</sup> Babbitt also criticizes the modern valorization of the “original genius” and the priority modern culture places on uniqueness and novelty. He associates this with Rousseau and contrasts what he calls “Rousseaism” with his “humanism.” The latter emphasizes the study of the humanities as a way to maintain a “humane standard,” which should be the

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<sup>253</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 5-7. Norman Foerster edited an anthology of the “New Humanism,” which includes essays from More, Babbitt, and T.S. Eliot: *Humanism and America: Essays on the Outlook of American Civilisation* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1930).

<sup>254</sup> For instance, Potter, *Humanism*, 110-112, and O.W. Firkins, “The Two Humanisms: A Discrimination,” *New Humanist* 4 (1931): 1-9; cited in Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 6, fn 6.

<sup>255</sup> Irving Babbitt, “What I Believe: Rousseau and Religion,” *Forum* 38:2 (Feb. 1930): 80-87.

benchmark for judging all other culture.<sup>256</sup> This new humanism harbors an ethos that goes beyond merely recovering and studying the “humanities,” but it differs greatly from the religious humanism pioneered by Potter and others.

Olds’ fourth type of humanism is “Nietzschean,” though he offers little argument for why Nietzsche should be considered “humanist.” His short section casts Nietzsche as a radical atheist who considers religion, and in particular theism, to be a manipulative delusion.<sup>257</sup> Olds does, however, explain the influence Nietzsche had on the founders of religious humanism, such as Potter’s adoption of the term “*Superman*.”<sup>258</sup> Olds appears to understand Nietzsche as eminently concerned with the role of the human after the death of God. Inasmuch as the idealized *übermensch* becomes the destroyer of God and creator of his own good, then the human lies at the center of Nietzsche’s “humanist” philosophy.

Intellectual historian Stefanos Geroulanos observes that while many have adopted this reading of Nietzsche, others, like Maurice Blanchot, thoroughly reject it.<sup>259</sup> For Blanchot, Nietzsche sees his *übermensch* like the gods, as yet another empty, insufficient theory.<sup>260</sup> The human does not merely replace God as the new foundation and the measure of meaning, as in the anthropotheism of Feuerbach or of Auguste Comte. Rather, the human can and does negate itself, providing no foundation, but always possessing the limitless

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<sup>256</sup> Irving Babbitt, “On Being Original,” *Atlantic* 10 (March 1908): 388-96. Cited in Olds as a representative work; Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 6, fn 7.

<sup>257</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 7-9.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>259</sup> Stefanos Geroulanos, *An Atheism that Is Not Humanist Emerges in French Thought* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2010), 252-258.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

power to negate.<sup>261</sup> In the history that Geroulanos writes, Blanchot and his Nietzsche participate in what Emmanuel Levinas calls “an atheism that is not humanist.”<sup>262</sup> It is this tradition of anti-humanist atheism that a number of secular humanists whom I met at workshops and conferences consider postmodernist and which aggravates them by challenging the primacy of science as a guide to morals. Though Olds gives little reason for distinguishing “Nietzschean” humanism from the “naturalistic,” Blanchot’s Nietzsche is no humanist and fits awkwardly in the far more positivist tradition of nonbelief that predominates in Britain and the United States.<sup>263</sup>

Olds’ fifth and final humanism is “Naturalistic,” and he identifies most closely with the religious humanism he both practices and studies. Olds describes naturalistic humanists as “monists” because they “maintain that the world of nature is the sum total of reality.”<sup>264</sup> In the words of humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont, “The whole of existence is equivalent to Nature and outside of Nature nothing exists.”<sup>265</sup> Naturalistic monists disagree with dualists, who maintain that there is another kind of reality that exists in addition to the natural world, such as the supernatural realm of God or the immaterial realm of the mind or soul. Philosophically, naturalism is closely related to and compatible with

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<sup>261</sup> Maurice Blanchot, “On Nietzsche’s Side,” *The Work of Fire*, trans. by Charlotte Mandel (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1995), 287-299. See also Mark C. Taylor on the concept of denegation: “Denegating God,” *Critical Inquiry* 20:4 (1994): 592-610.

<sup>262</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Sur Maurice Blanchot*, 10; translated in Levinas, *Proper Names*, 127; quoted in Geroulanos, *Atheism that is Not Humanist*, 5. The phrase is the source for the title of Geroulanos’ book.

<sup>263</sup> Henri de Lubac draws a worthy distinction between positivist, Marxist, and Nietzschean humanisms in his strongly Catholic treatment of the subject: *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963). It is against de Lubac that Blanchot defends Nietzsche in “On Nietzsche’s Side.”

<sup>264</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 10.

<sup>265</sup> Lamont, *Philosophy of Humanism*, 35.

materialism, though both terms can vary in their precise meaning depending on the context to which one applies them and the extremity of their application.<sup>266</sup>

For instance, Olds contrasts the “new naturalism” of the twentieth century with what he calls the “mechanical naturalism” of the nineteenth.<sup>267</sup> Whereas the mechanistic approach reduces the complexity of human living to the laws of the physical world, the new naturalism applies the scientific method to questions of experience and how one ought to live.<sup>268</sup> Rather than reducing ethics and religion to epiphenomena, the new naturalism evaluates religion “critically,” and where appropriate, seeks to reform it “on the basis of its social usefulness.”<sup>269</sup> The echoes of John Dewey and *A Common Faith*<sup>270</sup> are certainly intentional, and the influence of Deweyan pragmatism on this tradition of humanism is difficult to understate. Writing in his memoirs, Corliss Lamont recalls taking “a good course under Professor John Dewey, whom I regarded as America’s greatest philosopher. He was in essence a Humanist, but preferred the word *Naturalist* to describe his position.”<sup>271</sup>

References to Dewey were commonplace among humanists I spoke to during interviews and fieldwork. Paul Kurtz even considered himself an intellectual heir to Dewey by way of

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<sup>266</sup> For discussions of “naturalism” and “materialism” as they relate to atheism and other forms of nonbelief, see Michael Martin, “Naturalism,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. by Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 557-560; and Alberto Hidalgo de Tuñon, “Materialism, Philosophical,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. by Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 524-528. For a discussion of the relationship between the two terms and their compatibility with certain forms of theism, see Michael Martin, *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 469-470.

<sup>267</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 10.

<sup>268</sup> Lamont, *Philosophy of Humanism*, 41.

<sup>269</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 11.

<sup>270</sup> John Dewey, *A Common Faith* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1934).

<sup>271</sup> Corliss Lamont, *Yes to Life: Memoirs of Corliss Lamont* (New York: Crossroad/Continuum, 1991), 29.



Sidney Hook, with whom Kurtz studied as an undergraduate at New York University.

In the following sections, I continue to build on Olds' basic framework by supplementing his account with traditions and figures he overlooks. Olds' narrative positions Unitarianism at the origins of religious humanism, though it has little to say about Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity, George Jacob Holyoake's Secularism, or the various strains of nineteenth-century freethought, all of which contributed vitally to the development of nontheistic religious humanism in the early part of the twentieth century. This ongoing struggle among humanists over what humanism is, whether it can be purified of religion, and how one should do so continues to influence how the leaders of America's nonbeliever organizations pursue and present their activities. As the boundaries between the secular and the religious have shifted, and as attention to that boundary has increased, secular/religious hybridity has become both harder to accept and harder to ignore. The following account attends to the ongoing reconstruction of the humanist tradition and its complex relationships with religion and the secular.

### **Nineteenth-Century Antecedents of Organized Humanism**

"Humanism" as an English-language term for a human-centered view of the world that does not affirm traditional views of theism or the supernatural dates to at least the mid-nineteenth century. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and *Principles of Philosophy of the Future* (1843), Ludwig Feuerbach argues that objects are only real in their relationship

to humans.<sup>272</sup> By extension, God is an object made real through the human subject. In a sense, Feuerbach inverts the roles of God and man, ceding creative power to the latter even while reasserting the importance of religion and man's relationship with God. The term "humanism" appears in English translations of and commentaries on Feuerbach's work, but as the Oxford English Dictionary observes, it is also a term adopted by his critics. In his 1853 book *Infidelity: Its Aspect, Causes, and Agency*, Reverend Thomas Pearson calls Feuerbach and his student Karl Grün "the great teachers of humanism," which he describes as "a system which finds everything in man, which ignores all power but the human will, and which is as intolerant of the existence of religion as of private property."<sup>273</sup> Humanism is not yet a philosophy in its own right, but a term available to describe a view of the world in which the human, as opposed to God, is central. Like "secular humanism" in the mid-twentieth century, "humanism" in the mid-nineteenth is more epithet than self-appellation.

Writing in 1870 for the third edition of his *Principles of Secularism*, British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake describes humanism as one of the four "leading ideas of Secularism," along with moralism, materialism, and "utilitarian unity."<sup>274</sup> Holyoake's capital-S "Secularism" is a term that he coined in 1851 to describe an avowedly human-

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<sup>272</sup> Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. by George Eliot (New York: Harper, 1957); *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. by Manfred H. Vogel (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Co., 1986). Corliss Lamont, for instance, includes "the brilliant Feuerbach" in his history of the humanist tradition: Lamont, *Philosophy of Humanism*, 46-47. For an historical account of the influence of Feuerbach on Unitarians and Transcendentalists, see Elizabeth Hurth, *Between Faith and Unbelief: American Transcendentalism and the Challenge of Atheism* (Boston: Brill, 2007), 95-122.

<sup>273</sup> Thomas Pearson, *Infidelity: Its Aspect, Causes, and Agency* (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1854), 390.

<sup>274</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism, Illustrated* (London: Austin & Co., 1870), 28.

centered intellectual and social movement that entails ethics and prescribes a way of living.<sup>275</sup> He elaborates only briefly on his understanding of the term “humanism,” describing it as “the physical perfection of this life.”<sup>276</sup> Holyoake uses humanism in a sense similar to Feuerbach’s so-called “humanism”: the human is both the measure and the aim. “Secularism,” of which humanism is a part, “relates to the present existence of man, and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life—having for its objects the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point.”<sup>277</sup> In Holyoake’s framework, humanism is still not a freestanding system of thought. It fits within Secularism, referring positively to one of its central ideas.

Holyoake’s Secularism was well known among the Americans who founded the Free Religious Association (FRA), a group that a number of historians of organized humanism consider a forerunner of the avowedly humanist groups that arose in the 1920s.<sup>278</sup> The FRA was formed in 1867, in response to the 1865 and 1866 national conventions of the American Unitarian Association, during which Unitarian leaders like Henry Whitney

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<sup>275</sup> Ibid. On the coining of “Secularism,” see George Jacob Holyoake, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (London: Watts & Co., 1896), 50-53. For more on the intellectual, political, and social context leading to Holyoake’s coinage, see Edward Royle, *Victorian Infidels: The Origins of the British Secularist Movement 1791-1866* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1974). Also see chapter four of this dissertation for a more in-depth discussion of the origins and tenets of Holyoake’s Secularism.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>278</sup> Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism, Revised Ed.* (Minneapolis: Fellowship of Religious Humanists, 1996), 30-33. Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969), 58-60.

Bellows pressed for the adoption of an explicitly Christian platform.<sup>279</sup> More theologically radical Unitarians, such as Octavius Brooks Frothingham, William James Potter, and Francis Ellingwood Abbot, sought to form an association that could provide a big tent for a wide range of religious views while prioritizing the principles of free inquiry and individual judgment.<sup>280</sup> Frothingham became the organization's first president, and Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first to sign as a member.<sup>281</sup> The group was eclectic, with its initial officers coming from Unitarianism, Universalism, Quakerism, Spiritualism, Judaism, and the "Unchurched."<sup>282</sup> According to its first Constitution, the FRA was organized "to promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of theology, and to increase fellowship in the spirit."<sup>283</sup> It was also organized so that membership was not exclusive; those joining the FRA could also be members of other groups, including the American Unitarian Association.<sup>284</sup>

In 1873, Frothingham published *The Religion of Humanity*, in which he develops a

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<sup>279</sup> Daniel Vaca, "Great Religions' as Peacemaker: What Unitarian Infighting Did for Comparative Religion," *History of Religions* 53:2 (2013): 132-133. Vaca notes the importance of Frothingham and FRA-critic James Freeman Clarke, among others, for the development of comparative religion in America, and in particular, the 1893 World's Parliament of World Religions. In his commemorative address at the twenty-fifth annual convention of the Free Religious Association in 1892, William James Potter observes that free religionists imagined a "World's Convention" of religions as early as 1872. For Potter, that a "Presbyterian Doctor of Divinity" is the Parliament's chairman is a sign that the "religious world is moving," and becoming more like the future imagined by the FRA. Potter, *The Free Religious Association: Its 25 Years and Their Meaning* (Boston: Free Religious Association of American, 1892), 24-25.

<sup>280</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 31-32. Potter, *The Free Religious Association*, 16-18.

<sup>281</sup> Sidney Warren, *American Freethought: 1860-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943), 98-99.

<sup>282</sup> Potter, *Free Religious Association*, 15. Warren, *American Freethought*, 98.

<sup>283</sup> Quoted in Potter, *Free Religious Association*, 16.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*

theology that aids in providing a bridge between Unitarianism and the avowedly non-Christian, nontheistic religious humanism of the twentieth century.<sup>285</sup> Frothingham takes his title from Auguste Comte's positivist religion, which Comte also called the Religion of Humanity.<sup>286</sup> In a book with no kind words for Catholicism, Frothingham finds Comte's system insufficiently free of its origins: "The Church of Humanity was modeled in every respect on the Catholic plan. [...] It is the Roman Church over again without its theology."<sup>287</sup> In his own Religion of Humanity, Frothingham seeks to correct what Comte has "corrupted and perverted."<sup>288</sup> Unlike Comte, his theology self-consciously re-inscribes Christianity more than it attempts to replace it.

By expanding and re-imagining Christian concepts like the Bible, Christ, and atonement, Frothingham transforms Christianity into the vehicle of a new dispensation. This new religion, the Religion of Humanity, is naturalist and materialist, yet it avoids being reductionist by stretching the notion of existence in a way that is deeply indebted to Feuerbach. Frothingham credits even misrepresentations of God as pointing indirectly to something real in humanity and the world: "The Christ of Humanity is the *human element in all Mankind* [...] He is the symbol of that essential human nature which is the Messiah

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<sup>285</sup> Octavius Brooks Frothingham, *The Religion of Humanity* (New York: David G. Francis, 1873).

<sup>286</sup> For a more accessible introduction to Comte's system than the massive, four-volume *System of Positive Polity, or Treatise on Sociology, Instituting the Religion of Humanity*, see Comte, *The Catechism of Positive Religion*, trans. by Richard Congreve (London: John Chapman, 1858). The *Catechism* is written as a thirteen-part dialogue between a female initiate and a male priest.

<sup>287</sup> Frothingham, *Religion of Humanity*, 33.

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.* Frothingham was fluent in French and was a translator of Ernest Renan. Renan, *Studies of Religious History and Criticism*, authorized translation from the original French by Octavius Brooks Frothingham (New York: Carleton, 1864).

cradled in the bosom of every man."<sup>289</sup> Much like the religious humanism of the twentieth century, Frothingham's Religion of Humanity embraces naturalism but refuses to relinquish the language and even the organizing concepts of the Unitarian Christianity out of which it grows. He finds in all religions the kernels of truth, though he sees those religions through the salient concepts of liberal Protestant Christianity rather than on their own terms. By imagining a universal religion accessible in its plurality, and by fixating especially on the incarnation and immanence of God in the world and in the human, Frothingham also presages by nearly a century elements of both the perennialism of Aldous Huxley and the death of God theology of Thomas J.J. Altizer.<sup>290</sup>

Francis Ellingwood Abbot, another of FRA's three founders, appropriated Holyoake's Secularism to create a distinctly American version that would also contribute to later forms of organized humanism. Abbot was the founding editor of *The Index*, a journal that began in 1870 as the *de facto* mouthpiece of the FRA.<sup>291</sup> More politically and religiously radical than Frothingham, Abbot broke with the Unitarian Church following the adoption of its Christian platform and soon after resigned from his position as minister of the Unitarian Society in Dover, New Hampshire.<sup>292</sup> Parishioners who still considered themselves Unitarian filed and won a lawsuit that ended Abbot's brief stint as minister of "Free

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<sup>289</sup> Frothingham, *Religion of Humanity*, 90 (emphasis in original), 109.

<sup>290</sup> Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945). Thomas J.J. Altizer, *The Gospel of Christian Atheism* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966).

<sup>291</sup> Sydney E. Ahlstrom, "Francis Ellingwood Abbot: His Education and Active Career," Vol. 2 (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1951), 126, 138-165. *The Index* would later become the mouthpiece of another organization Abbot co-founded, the National Liberal League, before returning to the FRA under the eds.hip of the FRA's third co-founder, William James Potter. *Ibid.*, 97, fn 1.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*, 25-28.

Religion” for an Independent Society that met in the same Dover Meeting House.<sup>293</sup> In 1869, Abbot was welcomed by a congregation in Ohio, which agreed to his demand to break from the American Unitarian Association and reconstitute itself as the First Independent Society of Toledo.<sup>294</sup> In 1880, he would also leave the Free Religious Association, in part out of frustration with members whom he viewed as overly Christian and insufficiently “liberal”—as in “free”—in their religion and politics.<sup>295</sup>

In the years following the Civil War, the noun “Liberal” allowed a meaning that has since fallen out of use. In the parlance of Abbot and his interlocutors, “Liberals” frequently referred to advocates of “Free Religion” and included a wide variety of Christians, Jews, Spiritualists, atheists, and other freethinkers.<sup>296</sup> By the mid-1870s, being Liberal could also imply support for Abbot’s “Demands of Liberalism,” a nine-item list he published in *The Index* on April 6, 1872, and which was later reprinted on the front page of every issue.<sup>297</sup> Abbot composed the “Demands” in response to ongoing attempts by the National Reform

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid., 31-38.

<sup>294</sup> Ibid., 112-129. Not all parishioners agreed, but those who dissented failed to found a longstanding Unitarian congregation in lieu of the one Abbot replaced.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 191-218.

<sup>296</sup> This use of “Liberal” is ubiquitous in the pages of *The Index* throughout the 1870s. For a recent consideration of this usage, see Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002), 294-296. Leigh Eric Schmidt points to the need for histories of liberal religion that can account for its intersections with “free religion” and the avowedly secularist Liberal Leagues; Schmidt, “Introduction,” *American Religious Liberalism*, ed. Schmidt and Sally M. Prome (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 2012). This dearth of scholarship makes Vaca’s essay on Unitarian infighting cited twice above all the more important for the historiography of American religious liberalism.

<sup>297</sup> Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “The Demands of Liberalism,” in *The Index: A Weekly Paper Devoted to Free Religion, Vol. 3*, ed. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, William James Potter, and Benjamin Franklin Underwood, (Toledo, Ohio: Index Association, 1872), 108-109.

Association to pass a Christian amendment to the Constitution.<sup>298</sup> Nationwide support for the “Demands” inspired the founding of dozens of local “Liberal Leagues” throughout the country, and in 1876, Abbot and others formed a parent organization, the National Liberal League.<sup>299</sup>

That same year, Abbot played an important role in the development of American secularism. Writing in the January 6, 1876 issue of *The Index*, in an article called “The Unfinished Window,” Abbot merged Holyoake’s “Secularism” with his own idiosyncratic version of “Liberalism,” imbuing the former with another distinct, but related meaning.<sup>300</sup> In addition to “philosophical,” capital-S Secularism, Abbot advocated “political” secularism, which he understood to mean the separation of church and state.<sup>301</sup> Abbot’s conflation allowed him to discursively merge the trans-Atlantic “Secularist” movement with the “free religion” movement he had helped to found with the FRA and the “Liberal” movement he had inspired with the “Demands of Liberalism.” As historian Tisa Wenger observes, this conflation contributes to an ongoing confusion over the definition of “secularism,” and real

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<sup>298</sup> Ahlstrom, *Abbot*, 191-218. Also see Hamburger, *Separation*, 287-334, and Tisa Wenger, “The God-in-the-Constitution Controversy: American Secularisms in Historical Perspective,” in *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, ed. by Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 87-105.

<sup>299</sup> Ahlstrom, 201-203. By 1880, the National Liberal League had 225 local societies; *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>300</sup> Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “The Unfinished Window,” published January 6, 1876 in *The Index: A Weekly Paper Devoted to Free Religion, Vol. 7*, ed. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, William James Potter, and Benjamin Franklin Underwood (Boston: Index Association), 6-7.

<sup>301</sup> Prominent nineteenth-century freethinker Samuel Porter Putnam observes the bifurcation of secularism in his *400 Years of Freethought*, though he does not locate its origin; Putnam, *400 Years* (New York: The Truth Seeker Company, 1894), 506. See chapter four for a lengthier discussion of Abbot’s role in the invention of “secularism” as the separation of church and state.



tension persists between the two senses.<sup>302</sup> Recovering the term's origin helps us understand how and why it came to acquire the meanings and significance it has today.<sup>303</sup>

In 1878, Abbot had a falling out with the National Liberal League following the organization's decision to urge the repeal of the anti-obscenity laws passed in 1873 and named for U.S. Postal Inspector Anthony Comstock. Upon leaving, he helped to found an ill-fated alternative, the National Liberal League of America.<sup>304</sup> By July of 1880, Abbot had effectively broken from all of his affiliations and had begun a Ph.D. in philosophy at Harvard University.<sup>305</sup> He finished his doctorate the following year, though Harvard President Charles Eliot told Abbot that his reputation made it impossible for the university to hire him as a professor.<sup>306</sup> He would become a participant in Harvard's famed Metaphysical Club, and his dissertation work on "scientific theism" was well received by the founders and leading lights of American pragmatism, William James and Charles Sanders Peirce.<sup>307</sup> He would also have a public falling out with Harvard philosopher Josiah Royce.<sup>308</sup> In 1903, on the tenth anniversary of his wife's death, and after completing his final philosophical manuscript, Abbot committed suicide by poison, dying on his wife's

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<sup>302</sup> Wenger, "God-in-the-Constitution Controversy," 89-90. See chapter four for a discussion of the tensions between various meanings of secularism and the secular.

<sup>303</sup> For a larger discussion of the institutional transformations effected by various types of explicit and implicit "secularists," see Christian Smith, ed., *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>304</sup> Ahlstrom, *Abbot*, 219-250.

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.*, 281.

<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.*, 285.

<sup>307</sup> *Ibid.*, 4. W. Creighton Peden, "Francis Ellingwood Abbot," *The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, Vols. 1-4, ed. by John R. Shook (Bristol: Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 1-7.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

grave.<sup>309</sup>

The Free Religious Association also played an important role in Felix Adler's founding of the first Society for Ethical Culture in New York City, a key antecedent of early twentieth-century religious humanism. Unlike Abbot's fleeting associations, Adler built a movement that would last. The New York Society remains an active community today, and since 1910 they have owned and occupied a large stone building located at the corner of 64<sup>th</sup> Street and Central Park West.<sup>310</sup> In 1878, when Ethical Culture was still nascent, Adler became the second President of the FRA, replacing an aging Frothingham.<sup>311</sup> Imagining an ambitious future for the organization as it entered its second decade, Adler pursued a platform that included a school for training free religious leaders and a plan for endowing university chairs.<sup>312</sup> Like Abbot, he was also interested in social and political activism that would extend beyond the FRA's annual meetings.<sup>313</sup> Wary of the institution-building necessary for concrete action, the FRA resisted Adler's new initiatives, and he eventually resigned from its presidency.<sup>314</sup> Despite his frustration, the connections that Adler formed in New England had a strong influence on Ethical Culture, and in his role as President, he was able to attract a number of men who would become the leaders of his new movement.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>309</sup> Ahlstrom, *Abbot*, 298-301.

<sup>310</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 174.

<sup>311</sup> Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969), 58-59.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*, 59. Ahlstrom, *Abbot*, 261.

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>314</sup> Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 59.

<sup>315</sup> Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture: Memories and Studies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981), 75-77.

Howard B. Radest, former Executive Director of the American Ethical Union and author of the Ethical movement's most complete history, argues that there are two years one can cite for the beginnings of Ethical Culture: 1876 and 1882.<sup>316</sup> The first is the date carved into the stone exterior of the New York Society and the year in which Adler gave a speech announcing his philosophy and intent to organize.<sup>317</sup> Born in Alzey, Germany in 1851, Adler, along with the rest of his family, moved to New York City just six years later in order for his father, Samuel Adler, to become rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, the wealthiest congregation in the United States and one of its leading Reform synagogues.<sup>318</sup> After graduating from Columbia College in 1870, Adler returned to Germany where he received his doctorate in semitics at the University of Heidelberg.<sup>319</sup> Expected to succeed his father at Temple Emanu-El, he gave the Sabbath sermon upon his return in 1873; he titled it "The Future of Judaism."<sup>320</sup>

Adler's radical vision went over poorly with his father's congregation, foreclosing the possibility of his becoming their rabbi. Adler did, however, make a good impression on a minority of its members.<sup>321</sup> With their help, he secured a short-term appointment at newly founded Cornell University and eventually returned to New York City to give a speech that would spark a movement. At the fore of Adler's call were action and ethics:

Believe or disbelieve as ye list—we shall at all times respect every honest conviction. But be one with us where there is nothing to divide—in action. Diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed! This is that practical religion from which none

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<sup>316</sup> Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 60.

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.*, 26-35.

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>319</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 174.

<sup>320</sup> Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 17.

<sup>321</sup> *Ibid.*, 18, 27.

dissents. This is that platform broad enough and solid enough to receive the worshipper and the “infidel.” This is that common ground where we may all grasp hands as brothers, united in mankind’s common cause.<sup>322</sup>

This excerpt from Adler’s 1876 address hints at why Radest would claim a second genesis for Ethical Culture. Adler’s 1882 resignation from the Free Religious Association soured him to the schisms of other movements and inspired him to pursue his own vision: independent societies, supplied with trained leaders by a national organization, and with a focus more on social action than intellectual debate or ritual communion.<sup>323</sup>

In 1910, the New York Society for Ethical Culture decided to amend its original charter. The new document articulated explicit understandings of “religion” and “religious” while emphasizing morality and refusing to take a position on the supernatural:

Interpreting the word ‘religion’ to mean fervent devotion to the highest moral ends, our Society is distinctly a religious body. But toward religion as a confession of faith in things superhuman the attitude of the Society is neutral. Neither acceptance or [sic] rejection of any theological doctrine disqualifies for membership.<sup>324</sup>

Conscious of Ethical Culture’s proximity to the boundary of the religious, Adler approached it carefully. Several Ethical Leaders with whom I spoke paraphrased a passage from a lecture he once gave: “The Ethical Movement is religious to those who are religiously-minded [sic] and to those who interpret its work religiously, and it is simply ethical to

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<sup>322</sup> Felix Adler, “Address of May 15, 1876, Standard Hall, New York City,” quoted in Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 28. Also available at “Founding Address by Felix Adler,” *Ethical Leaders Network*, <http://www.aeuleaders.net/web/content/founding-address-felix-adler>, accessed August 18, 2014.

<sup>323</sup> Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 60.

<sup>324</sup> Quoted in Edward L. Ericson, *The Humanist Way: An Introduction to Ethical Humanist Religion* (New York: Continuum, 1988), 12.

those who are not so minded.”<sup>325</sup> His “ethical religion” would undergo a number of significant changes over the next century and a half, but as I demonstrate below, “ethics” remain a central concern.<sup>326</sup>

Though Adler founded an international movement that would have an enormous impact on present-day humanism, he strived to distinguish Ethical Culture from the organized humanism that emerged in the 1920s.<sup>327</sup> Adler’s philosophy relied heavily on the idealism of Immanuel Kant, though he modified Kant’s system in key ways.<sup>328</sup> For Adler, ethics are independent of the physical world; they are transcendent and real, but they not supernatural.<sup>329</sup> The human mind can create its own reality, oriented toward an actual moral ideal. The sum total of individual orientations to the ideal comprises the “infinite ethical manifold.”<sup>330</sup> Adler’s system allowed him to anchor morality and fend off skepticism while disavowing traditional theism and constructing a religion concerned with this life. He considered humanism to be far too naturalistic to be compatible with Ethical Culture’s metaphysics, and up through his death in 1933, he refused to align himself with the nascent humanist movement.<sup>331</sup>

The Ethical movement became international when Stanton Coit arrived in London in

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<sup>325</sup> Felix Adler, *Our Part in This World*, ed. by Horace L. Friess (New York: King’s Crown Press, 1946), 68. The volume is a collection of undated selections that Friess compiled from transcripts of lectures given by Adler. King’s Crown Press is a now-defunct division of Columbia University Press. “Leader” is capitalized because it is a formal title applied to the movement’s trained, clergy-like figures and intended here in that sense.

<sup>326</sup> “Ethical religion” is Adler’s phrase. See, for instance, Adler, *Our Part in This World*, 67.

<sup>327</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 179.

<sup>328</sup> Joseph Chuman, *Between Secularism and Supernaturalism: The Religious Philosophies of Theodore Parker and Felix Adler* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1994), 150-169.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 170-

<sup>330</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>331</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 179.

the late 1880s.<sup>332</sup> Coit had trained in New York under Adler, who then arranged for him to pursue graduate work at the University of Berlin. Upon returning, Coit founded the first settlement house in the United States—two years before Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago.<sup>333</sup> After a brief stint as minister of London's South Place Unitarian congregation, Coit began establishing the British Ethical movement, eventually founding the British Ethical Union.<sup>334</sup> Like Adler, Coit distanced himself from humanism and did not want others to refer to the Ethical movement as the humanist movement.<sup>335</sup> Despite Coit's reservations, it was out of Britain's Ethical Societies, and in close relationship with the secularist and rationalist movements, that freethinkers first began describing their efforts as "humanism."<sup>336</sup> The term joined an already complex constellation of labels that had long included references to the Religion of Humanity, a phrase that was popular among followers of Comte (and as in Frothingham's case, with those seeking to correct him).<sup>337</sup>

One of its earliest adopters was Frederick J. Gould, an apprentice of Coit who played a prominent role in founding the British Ethical movement. He broke with Coit in 1899 and

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<sup>332</sup> Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 74. For more on the founding of Ethical Societies in Britain, see I.D. MacKillop, *The British Ethical Societies* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

<sup>334</sup> Budd, *Varieties*, 224, 232.

<sup>335</sup> MacKillop, *British Ethical Societies*, 117.

<sup>336</sup> Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (London: Rationalist Press Association, 1994), 65-69. Walter considers "the first clear call in the freethought movement for the adoption of *humanism*" to be Charles E. Hooper's article entitled "Humanism," which appeared in the December 8, 1900 issue of the journal *Ethical World*. Walter, *Humanism*, 66. For more on the history of "rationalism" and "Rational religion" as a social movement, see Royle, *Victorian Infidels*, 55, 59-106, 126-129.

<sup>337</sup> See T.R. Wright, *The Religion of Humanity: The Impact of Comtean Positivism on Victorian Britain* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

began using the term “humanism” around the same time.<sup>338</sup> Gould recognized that a wide array of labels had proliferated among his fellow freethinkers, but he did not treat them as mutually exclusive. In an article published in October of 1900 he wrote, “true Rationalism includes humanism.” In another article the following month he stated his affiliations plainly: “I am a Freethinker, Atheist, Agnostic, Secularist, Positivist, Ethicist, Rationalist.”<sup>339</sup> Gould would go on to write an autobiography in 1923 entitled *The Life-Story of a Humanist*, and he preferred the term “humanism” above all others through the rest of his life.<sup>340</sup>

Testimony from a United States Congressional hearing held in 1915 offers a glimpse into the transition from secularism to humanism among organized nonbelievers and underscores the trans-Atlantic movement of labels and ideas among nonbelievers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his testimony, John D. Bradley, president of the Washington Secular League defined his worldview for a bemused Congressman: “Secularism is the religion of humanism, the religion of the renaissance; it represents the move of modern civilization; it is founded upon the experience of this life, the only experience that any of us knows anything about.”<sup>341</sup> Bradley interweaves disparate intellectual threads in order to locate secularism and humanism within a shared, legitimate

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<sup>338</sup> MacKillop, *British Ethical Societies*, 168.

<sup>339</sup> F.J. Gould, *Literary Guide* (October and November 1900), quoted in Walter, *Humanism*, 69.

<sup>340</sup> Walter, *Humanism*, 70.

<sup>341</sup> United States Congress, House Committee on Post Office and Post Roads, *Exclusion of certain publications from the mails: hearing before the Committee on the Post Office and Post Roads, House of Representatives, Sixty-third Congress, third session, on H.R. 20644 and H.R. 21183, bills to exclude certain publications from the mails, February 1, 1915* (Washington : G.P.O., 1915), 44. The Washington Secular League was a local affiliate of the American Secular Union, though the latter dissolved around 1920. Bill Cooke, “American Secular Union,” *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 52-53.

tradition. He equates Holyoake-style secularism with a religion called humanism, which he then conflates with the humanism of the Renaissance. He locates this triad within the movement of modern civilization—a narrative of progress in which modernity brings a secular focus and a turn away from “supernatural religion”<sup>342</sup>

By the time *The Humanist*, an English journal, published its first issue on January 1, 1917, references to “religious humanism” and “humanist religion” had been circulating for well over a decade. The journal announced its mission in its very first article, “The Religion of Humanism”:

We seek to widen and deepen the whole concept of religion; to get it out from the stifling prison in which the Churches have, for long ages, confined it—out into the air, where it can breathe and flourish and grow magnificently. [...] It is in order to stimulate the will of the people, and of the rulers, that this journal will devote itself to the promulgation of the religion of Humanism.<sup>343</sup>

*The Humanist* was a mouthpiece for the British Ethical Societies, but it was published by the Rationalist Press Association (RPA), an organization founded in 1899 by Charles Watts and George Jacob Holyoake.<sup>344</sup> Through Holyoake’s role in the RPA, which Gould also helped to found, he had a hand in the creation of two of the most influential -isms in the history of organized nonbelievers: secularism and humanism. The next section looks across the Atlantic and examines the rise of organized religious humanism in America, introducing more of the organizations that continue to dot the contemporary landscape of organized nonbelief.

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<sup>342</sup> Congress, 44.

<sup>343</sup> “The Religion of Humanism,” published January 1, 1917 in *The Humanist*, ed. Charles T. Gorham and George A. Smith (London: The Rationalist Press Association, 1917), 1-2.

<sup>344</sup> Budd, *Varieties*, 70-71. The Rationalist Press Association has persisted through various transformations, and in 2002 it became the Rationalist Association.



## The Founders of Organized Humanism

The organized humanism that developed in the United States in the nineteen-teens and twenties was spearheaded by a number of clergymen, former clergymen, and scholars. In this section, I look briefly at five central figures in the rise of American humanism: John H. Dietrich, Curtis W. Reese, Charles Francis Potter, Roy Wood Sellars, and A. Eustace Haydon.<sup>345</sup> Three of the four were Unitarian ministers, and two were prominent scholars of philosophy and religion. In this section, I address each in turn and consider their respective roles in the popularization of humanism, the creation of the first Humanist Manifesto, and the founding of the American Humanist Association. In their personal biographies and in their collaborative efforts one finds an expansion of the category of religion that blurs its boundary with the secular, and at times, tries to move beyond it altogether. In the section that follows, I return to Ethical Culture and examine the post-WWII mergers that produced Ethical Humanism, the Fellowship of Religious Humanism, and Humanistic Judaism.

John H. Dietrich began using the term “humanism” around 1915, shortly before

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<sup>345</sup> In choosing these five, I largely follow Olds, though others have focused on a similar set of leading figures. Edwin H. Wilson, a Unitarian minister who wrote a history of the first Humanist Manifesto and is important in his own right as one of its eds., suggests Reese, Dietrich, T.C. Abell, Charles Francis Potter, and E. Burdett Backus as the “popularizers” of humanism; Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto*, ed. by Teresa Maciocha (Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1995), 10. W. Creighton Peden presents a longer and more scholar-centric history of the rise of humanism by emphasizing Ralph Waldo Emerson, Frothingham, Abbot, William James Potter, George Burman Foster, Edward Scribner Ames, and Haydon; Peden, “The Rise of American Humanism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries,” *Essays in the Philosophy of Humanism* 19:2 (Washington, D.C.: The American Humanist Association, Fall/Winter 2011): 27-42.

becoming minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis.<sup>346</sup> He borrowed it from an article he read by Gould that appeared in the British Ethical Culture journal, *Ethical World*.<sup>347</sup> Though the term originated with Gould and his RPA and Ethical colleagues in Britain, Americans would be the first to formally institutionalize humanism. Dietrich set the wheels in motion by using the term in his sermons and writing, and it was Dietrich who introduced it to Reese in 1917 when they met at the Western Unitarian Conference in Des Moines, Iowa. Though Reese had been using a phrase of his own creation, the “religion of Democracy,” he eventually accepted Dietrich’s appellation, and the two became some of the first to popularize religious humanism in the United States.<sup>348</sup>

Born in 1878, Dietrich was raised in a devout Reformed household in rural Pennsylvania. After graduating from Franklin and Marshall College in Lancaster, he worked for a time as the private secretary of a wealthy Unitarian in New York City. Once he saved enough money, he moved on to pursue a graduate degree at the Eastern Theological Seminary of the Reformed Church. Though his personal theology had grown increasingly liberal, Dietrich became minister of a Reformed congregation in Pittsburgh upon graduation. Despite being well-liked by many of his parishioners, two wealthy benefactors of the church saw that heresy charges were brought against him in 1911, which in turn led to his departure from the Reformed Church and entry into Unitarianism. He became minister of the First Unitarian Society in Spokane, Washington later that same year, and in

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<sup>346</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 33.

<sup>347</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 33, 56, and footnote 5 on page 204. In making these connections, Olds relies heavily on a biography of Dietrich written by his second wife, the widow of a man named Carleton Winston: Mrs. Carleton Winston, *This Circle of Earth* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1942).

<sup>348</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 34.

just five years, he grew the congregation from sixty to more than fourteen hundred. In 1916, he became minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis, where he would remain until retiring to Berkeley, California in 1941.<sup>349</sup>

By the height of his career, Dietrich had developed what he called a “Religion without God.”<sup>350</sup> His theology was not atheistic, at least not according to his understanding of atheism: “I do not use the term, atheist. Atheism, I believe, is properly used as a denial of God; and my attitude towards the idea of God is not that of denial at all; it is that of inquiry.”<sup>351</sup> Dietrich minimized the importance of belief in God, arguing that it refers to many different understandings, and no circumscription could ever be adequate:

And after all, men and women, no one can affirm or deny the existence of God without defining the term; and they are wisest who attempt no definition of the undefinable. [...] So long as a man believes in the integrity of the universe and of himself, names and symbols are relatively unimportant. Titles can bear little relation to the infinite.<sup>352</sup>

He praises the atheist who “does not try to penetrate beyond the veil of natural phenomena” and strives for the betterment of humanity, and he criticizes the nihilistic and self-serving atheism that justifies itself by the axiom “might makes right.”<sup>353</sup> He personally saw no grounds for doing away with all uses of the term “God,” nor did he think belief in

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 53-58.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid., 59, 97.

<sup>351</sup> John Dietrich, “Is Atheism a Menace?” *Humanist Pulpit 2* (Minneapolis: First Unitarian Society, 1928), 19. Also available online at *The FUS Archive*, <http://www.bstock.com/FUSarchive/omeka-2.0.3/items/show/206>, accessed August 25, 2014. Quoted in Olds, *American Religious Freedom*, 73.

<sup>352</sup> John Dietrich, “What Is an Atheist?” *Humanist Pulpit 2* (Minneapolis: First Unitarian Society, 1928), 14. Also available online at *The FUS Archive*, <http://www.bstock.com/FUSarchive/omeka-2.0.3/items/show/207>, accessed August 25, 2014.

<sup>353</sup> Ibid., 18.

God is necessary for “religious worship.”<sup>354</sup> Like his colleagues Reese and Potter, he saw in the structures and rituals of religion the means to exalt nature and humanity.<sup>355</sup>

Charles Francis Potter was also ordained in the ministry of his youth, and he became a Baptist pastor despite his growing theological liberalism. Born in Marlboro, Massachusetts in 1885, Potter became a minister in 1908, the same year as Reese. He joined the Unitarian Church around the same time as Dietrich, in 1914, and it was from Dietrich that he first learned of humanism. After Potter began as minister of a Unitarian congregation in Edmonton, Alberta, one of his parishioners observed that his theology of “Personalism” strongly resembled the “Humanism” he had heard a minister named Dietrich preach in Spokane, Washington. Though Potter was not known for his humanism as early as Dietrich and Reese, he reached wide renown as a humanist from 1930 on, and he played a significant role in creating a movement that could stand apart from Unitarianism.<sup>356</sup>

Potter established his national reputation in a series of debates with John Roach Straton, the theologically conservative pastor of New York City’s Calvary Baptist Church. In 1919, Potter had become minister of the city’s West Side Unitarian Church, and his congregation was thriving. In late 1923, he agreed to debate Straton on a range of issues, the first being the Bible as “the Infallible Word of God.”<sup>357</sup> Potter won the debate, along with the next two, and Straton won the fourth. Though Potter is hardly an exemplar of

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<sup>354</sup> John H. Dietrich, “Do Humanists Worship?” *Humanist Pulpit* 7 (Minneapolis: First Unitarian Society, 1934), 1-2. Also available online at *The FUS Archive*, <http://www.bstock.com/FUSarchive/omeka-2.0.3/items/show/102>, accessed August 25, 2014.

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>356</sup> Olds, *Americans Religious Liberalism*, 125-127, 132-133.

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.*, 127-128.

theological modernism, Straton published his side (and not Potter's) in 1925 as *The Famous New York Fundamentalist-Modernist Debates*.<sup>358</sup>

The heavily publicized events with Straton earned Potter a reputation as a formidable proponent of evolution, and he was asked to be an expert for the defense in the 1925 trial of John T. Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee.<sup>359</sup> For the rest of his career, Potter would stand apart from humanist Unitarians like Dietrich and Reese, but also from the vocal opponents of conservative religion like Scopes defense attorney Clarence Darrow and trial reporter H.L. Mencken. By 1929, Potter was deemed too radical for his new congregation, New York City's Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity. In September of that year he broke with Unitarianism and founded the First Humanist Society of New York. Though the new society never provided a sustainable income, it marked the first independent humanist institution, and the books and articles Potter wrote to earn his living remain touchstones in the movement's early history.<sup>360</sup>

Curtis W. Reese was born in 1887 to a devout Baptist family in North Carolina. Like Dietrich and Potter, he set his sights on the ministry and eventually made a break with the church of his youth. In 1926, while working in Chicago as Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, Reese became a member of the board of Meadville Theological Seminary and played an important role in its relocation from Meadville, Pennsylvania. Securing a large donation from a wealthy businessman, Reese outmatched competing

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<sup>358</sup> John Roach Straton, *The Famous New York Fundamentalist-Modernist Debates, the Orthodox Side* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1925).

<sup>359</sup> On the Scopes Trial, see Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>360</sup> Olds, *Americans Religious Liberalism*, 129-133.

offers from Ithaca and Cleveland and negotiated the seminary's affiliation with the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. He would later oversee the incorporation of Lombard College in 1933, resulting in the Meadville Lombard Theological School that exists today. Reese was an active Unitarian throughout his life, though not always as a minister. From 1930 until his retirement in 1957, he was Dean of the Abraham Lincoln Centre in Chicago, a position that allowed him to pursue a wide range of social service projects and oversee the publication of the Centre's journal, *Unity*.<sup>361</sup>

Among contemporary humanists, Reese is best known for his role in editing the Humanist Manifesto in 1933, for helping to found the American Humanist Association in 1941, and for serving as the organization's president for its first fourteen years.<sup>362</sup> The manifesto was a collaborative effort that arose from a group of students at Meadville Theological School and the University of Chicago who were interested in humanism. They started a Humanist Fellowship early in 1928, and by April they had published the first issue of their journal, *The New Humanist*.<sup>363</sup> Joined by professors and various clergymen, the students worked to draft and edit the document that would become a foundational and oft-referenced text of the American humanist movement. The manifesto's clearest immediate impact was among religious liberals, including more traditionally theistic Unitarians, and its reach in the broader culture appears modest.<sup>364</sup>

Roy Wood Sellars, professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, wrote the

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<sup>361</sup> *Ibid.*, 99-105.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, 20. Wilson, *Genesis*, 16.

<sup>364</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 24.

first draft of the Humanist Manifesto.<sup>365</sup> Though not a minister like Dietrich, Reese, and Potter, Sellars was one of the first to use the term “humanism” to describe their movement. In 1918, he published *The Next Step in Religion*, which he concluded with a bold call to naturalistic humanism.<sup>366</sup> Sellars does not identify his source for the term, though like others who were among the first to adopt it, he considered his humanism a great improvement over Comte’s Religion of Humanity.<sup>367</sup> He was a member of a Unitarian Church in Ann Arbor when he wrote *Next Step*, and in the 1920s and 30s he became increasingly involved with leading Unitarian humanists. In the history of philosophy, he is best known for developing “critical realism,” the eponymous subject of his first book, published in 1916, and for working closely with scientists to develop a systematic evolutionary naturalism.<sup>368</sup> As drafter of the first humanist manifesto and as the first scholar and one of the first Americans to articulate a philosophy of religious humanism, he remains important in the movement’s intellectual, if not institutional, development.<sup>369</sup>

Several of the students who started *The New Humanist* studied under University of

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>366</sup> Roy Wood Sellars, *The Next Step in Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1918).

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>368</sup> C.F. Delaney, “Roy Wood Sellars,” in *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, ed. John Shook (Bristol : Thoemmes Continuum, 2005), 2189-2192. Sellars, *Critical Realism: A Study of the Nature of Knowledge* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Company, 1916). This epistemological “critical realism” is distinct from the “critical realist” approach to religion that Kevin Schilbrack has advocated in recent years. See Schilbrack, “The Social Construction of ‘Religion’ and its Limits: A Critical Reading of Timothy Fitzgerald,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 24:2 (April 2012): 97-117; Schilbrack, “After We Deconstruct ‘Religion,’ Then What? A Case for Critical Realism,” *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 25: 1 (January 2013): 107-12.

<sup>369</sup> Edwin H. Wilson credits Sellars with a crucial role in the document’s development; *Genesis*, 27-30.

Chicago professor of Comparative Religion, A. Eustace Haydon.<sup>370</sup> Also trained as a Baptist minister, Haydon turned to Unitarianism after the first year of his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology and Comparative Religion at the University of Chicago. Completing his degree in 1918, with a dissertation entitled “The Conception of God in The Pragmatic Philosophy,” Haydon remained at Chicago to join the faculty of the Divinity School. Like his fellow scholar Sellars, he thought theistic belief would eventually pass away in a secularizing world that has little cultural role for deities.<sup>371</sup> Christianity was outmoded, and Haydon argued for a modern religion that could respond to the evolving needs of contemporary humanity.<sup>372</sup>

In 1936, Reese and Haydon founded the Humanist Press Association in Chicago, serving as its first president and vice-president, respectively. In 1941, they oversaw the organization’s transition to the American Humanist Association and the beginning of its publication of *The Humanist*.<sup>373</sup> Five years later, the AHA filed for a tax exemption as an educational organization, as opposed to a religious organization, marking another new institutional trajectory for humanism, separate from the Unitarian Church.<sup>374</sup> Haydon would also stray from Unitarianism, though as with the AHA, his new affiliation did not mark a break as much as a new direction. For a decade after his retirement from the University of Chicago in 1945, Haydon served as the Leader of the Chicago Ethical

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<sup>370</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>371</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 35-36. W. Creighton Peden, “Albert Eustace Haydon,” *Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers*, 1072-1074.

<sup>372</sup> Peden, “The Rise of American Humanism,” 37-39.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 39-40.

<sup>374</sup> “Having It Both Ways,” unattributed article, *Free Inquiry* 22:4 (Fall 2002), 40.



Society.<sup>375</sup> His personal union of Unitarian humanism and Adler's Ethical Culture mirrors the organizational mergers that took place during the same period following the Second World War. These mergers and their consequences are the subject of the next subsection.

As with the founders of the Free Religious Association, the founders of organized religious humanism developed their thought within a Unitarian context, in conversation with the liberal theology of Jews and other Protestants, nineteenth-century German criticisms of religion such as those of Feuerbach and Nietzsche, and emerging science like Darwin's theory of evolution. Though they were often critical of Christianity, they modeled the forms of their worship on particular forms of Protestantism. Despite their avowedly religious outlook, Dietrich, Potter, Reese, Sellars, and Haydon all sought to make traditional theism, and in some cases, all forms of theism, unnecessary for religion. Especially for those trained as ministers, religiosity remained central in terms of behavior and belonging, but the question of belief lost its importance, or at very least shifted away from a personal God and toward humanity and the laws of nature. Emphasizing morality and the improvement of the human condition, they all pursued social action and urged their parishioners and their readers to do the same. They created and argued for complex forms of secular/religious hybridity that broadened the definition of "religion" while remaining within its expanded limits. Writing in *Humanism*, Charles Francis Potter describes their novel hybrid with an old metaphor:

It is a new type of religion altogether. It is a new way of looking at religion. You have to make over and broaden your definition of religion to get Humanism in at all, especially if you come from a Christian background. The Humanist splits the seams of all the old coats of religion when he tries them on. The new wine has burst the old

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<sup>375</sup> Peden, "The Rise of American Humanism," 40.

wineskins.<sup>376</sup>

### **Ethical Humanism and Humanistic Judaism**

Neither Felix Adler nor Stanton Coit considered themselves humanists, and they used their influence to distance Ethical Culture from the nascent humanist movement. Among the generation of Ethical Leaders who succeeded Adler, his original neo-Kantian idealism gave way to a more thoroughgoing naturalism.<sup>377</sup> The Humanist Manifesto appeared in *The New Humanist* in 1933, shortly after Adler's death, and was signed by two Leaders from the Ethical movement, in addition to fifteen Unitarian ministers, one Universalist, and one Reform rabbi. Two other signers, Lester Mondale and A. Eustace Haydon, would become Ethical Leaders later in life.<sup>378</sup> The manifesto marked the beginning of a two-decades long rapprochement between Ethical Culture and humanism that would eventually culminate in the Declaration of the Amsterdam Congress of Humanists in 1952. Gathering organizations from the United States, Europe, and India, the Congress established the International Humanist and Ethical Union and created "Ethical Humanist" as an officially recognized term.<sup>379</sup>

Ethical Culture and humanism did not merge so much as the former embraced the latter. "Ethical" became an adjective that qualifies humanism, able to represent both an affiliation with Ethical Culture and a more general orientation towards ethics. This double framing of "ethical" creates a productive polysemy for ethicists, as I discovered during a

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<sup>376</sup> Potter, *Humanism*, 7.

<sup>377</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 188.

<sup>378</sup> Ericson, *Humanist Way*, 70.

<sup>379</sup> Radest, *Toward Common Ground*, 303-304.

visit to the New York Society for Ethical Culture in the summer of 2013. After the Sunday Platform, I was chatting with a man named Peter, who told me about a conversation he had recently overheard between his son and a few other children at the playground. The topic of religion had somehow come up, and the children were identifying as either Christian or Jewish. To Peter's great pride, his son told them, "I'm Ethical." Within a few moments the rest of the children said they, too, were ethical. Peter and I were impressed that they knew the term's vernacular definition, but for Peter and his son, the term meant much more. The doubleness of "Ethical" and "ethical" helps Peter see his religious affiliation as both a religion and a way of life. In the context of our conversation, Peter was using the anecdote to describe for me the complicated relationship he has with Ethical Culture; it is both less and more than a religion.

The Amsterdam Declaration of 1952 uses the polysemy of "ethical" to imagine humanism as a source of values in a dangerously rationalized world. The Declaration's list of the "fundamentals of modern, ethical humanism," includes an explicit, albeit peculiar, statement of ethics:

3. Humanism is ethical. It affirms the dignity of man and the right of the individual to the greatest possible freedom of development compatible with the right of others. There is a danger that in seeking to utilise [sic] scientific knowledge in a complex society individual freedom may be threatened by the very impersonal machine that has been created to save it. Ethical humanism, therefore, rejects totalitarian attempts to perfect the machine in order to obtain immediate gains at the cost of human values.<sup>380</sup>

The postwar context of the Declaration is clear, as "ethical" defines a limit to the pursuit of

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<sup>380</sup> The declaration is no longer available on the website of the International Humanist and Ethical Union, though it can be found through the Internet Archive at <https://web.archive.org/web/20080315024420/http://www.iheu.org/node/2061>.

scientific knowledge. The Declaration contains no reference to Ethical Culture, despite its marking a merger of the two movements. “Ethical” bore a tacit double sense throughout.

In 2002, for its fiftieth anniversary, the International Humanist and Ethical Union issued an updated Declaration in which “ethical” makes a more vernacular reference to morality:

1. Humanism is ethical. It affirms the worth, dignity and autonomy of the individual and the right of every human being to the greatest possible freedom compatible with the rights of others. Humanists have a duty of care to all of humanity including future generations. Humanists believe that morality is an intrinsic part of human nature based on understanding and a concern for others, needing no external sanction.<sup>381</sup>

Though neither Declaration refers to Ethical Culture directly, the organized humanists who wrote them were well aware of the movement’s shared history with humanism. As it does for Peter, the polysemy of “ethical” works subtly to create links across organizations and blur the boundary between religion, philosophy, and culture.

At the same time that the Ethical movement was growing closer to humanism, the latter was growing more secular. Though Ethical Culture and Unitarianism gave rise to humanism, many within the growing movement’s ranks found congregational models far too religious and sought to purify themselves and their organizations.<sup>382</sup> Howard B. Radest, historian of Ethical Culture and active participant in the postwar evolution of Ethical Humanism, observes that the question, “Are we religious?” is an old one among humanists: the Unitarians were too “pious,” the ethicists were too metaphysically idealist, and the

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<sup>381</sup> <http://iheu.org/humanism/the-amsterdam-declaration/>

<sup>382</sup> Budd, *Varieties*, 255-256. Budd is discussing the British movement, but her observation is consistent with Radest’s view of the United States. Also see Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 179-180.

humanists were too “secular.”<sup>383</sup> In the 1950s, these debates had “a certain friendliness of spirit.”<sup>384</sup> Geniality gave way to institutional schisms in the 1960s and 70s, culminating in 1980 with Paul Kurtz founding the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism. In Radest’s words, “[New organizations] serve as markers of Humanist efforts at self-definition. They offer clues to the evolving meanings attaching to modern Humanism.”<sup>385</sup> Ethical culture became open to humanism, but humanism eventually became less open to understanding itself as religious.

In 1963, a group that included some of those who were involved in creating the Humanist Manifesto founded a new organization, the Fellowship of Religious Humanists. The Fellowship provided a home for Ethical and Unitarian humanists, and its journal, *Religious Humanism*, a forum for their ideas.<sup>386</sup> After undergoing a number of transformations the Fellowship is now the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association (UUHA) and formally affiliated with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), itself a product of the Unitarian Universalist merger in 1961. Along with Ethical Culture and the Society for Humanistic Judaism, UUHA has become one of the representatives of nontheistic religious humanism in the United States.

Today, the organization sees itself as a stronghold of nontheism within an increasingly theistic Unitarian Universalism (UU). According to Greg, one of the organization’s leaders whom I quoted in the previous chapter, “There’s been a dilution of

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<sup>383</sup> Radest, *The Devil and Secular Humanism: The Children of the Enlightenment* (New York: Praeger, 1990), 50.

<sup>384</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>385</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>386</sup> Olds, *American Religious Humanism*, 185.

the solid nontheistic basis that Unitarianism once had, and we want to make sure it doesn't drift anymore." Over the course of our conversation, it became clear that Greg was sometimes voicing the concerns of other members of his organization and sometimes his own. For many involved, UUHA provides a platform for making UU more secular:

There are people who really want to change Unitarian Universalism, but they want to make UU the same as it used to be, which is the way they say it. I don't know if there is a pure former thing. They're saying they want to get back to this humanistic, nontheistic base and get away from all of this accommodation with religion and strong interfaith basis that UU is developing. [...] Some people [in UU] are very active in the secular movement and really think that UU has become too much about radical inclusion.

Greg sympathizes with those who worry about UU becoming more theistic, and he wishes UU ministers had a better understanding of science and could recognize that it complements the humanities rather than replaces them. Certain UU congregations will always be too religious for him, he told me, but he also thinks that Unitarian humanists become good at listening to what they want to hear and filtering out the God-talk.

Greg's approach is flexible, focusing less on the words people use and more on whether they share his goals. He minimized the difference between himself and those in the secular movement who think only theists should call themselves religious: "What we have in common is where we're going, not where we come from." He referred repeatedly to religion as a set of social relationships. When I asked him if he, too, worried about UU becoming too inclusive, he emphasized that the beliefs of his fellow congregants are less important than the bond he shares with them:

Someone will ask me, "Why do you stay with these people when they don't have the same take on the God thing that you do?" And my answer is always that I love them and they love me. There's a whole other dimension that sometimes we lose when we get tied up in the intellectual aspect of nonbelief.

For Greg, the “hard-nosed intellectual” ignores that cognition is embodied and thus oriented toward its own experiential ends. Referencing the philosopher George Lakoff and the psychologist Jonathan Haidt, Greg explained that his religious humanism is grounded in science, but guarded about its definite conclusions and conscious of its constraints.<sup>387</sup> He seeks to avoid extremes: “Somehow or other there's a middle ground where experience and logic and reason are compatible. The map's not the territory, I think.”

Greg invokes Alfred Korzybski’s dictum that “the map is not the territory” in order to make a point about language that he emphasized throughout our interview.<sup>388</sup> “I’m not an atheist,” he told me. “It’s a little presumptuous to say you're anything. To say you're anything isn't totally true. You get into the old Wittgensteinian word games again. What do you mean by God? Well, everything is God. OK, then I'll go for that.” In Greg’s perspective, words like “God” and “religious” are analogous to maps that represent territory, but which are not the territory itself. Because no word can ever perfectly circumscribe reality, words are always representations, which, like maps, simplify in order to better achieve certain ends. Greg’s ends are eminently social, and inasmuch as God-talk facilitates his relationships with his fellow Unitarian Universalists, he accepts it. Jonathan Z. Smith has made a similar point using the same phrase from Korzybski, observing as Greg does, that

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<sup>387</sup> See George Lakoff, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980) and *Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1999). Also see Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

<sup>388</sup> Alfred Korzybski coined the phrase in an essay from 1931 entitled, “A Non-Aristotelian System and Its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics,” reprinted in *Science and Sanity* (Brooklyn: Institute of General Semantics, 1958), 747-761. Greg did not mention Korzybski by name, nor did he identify his source for the metaphor.

life often disrupts the map that religion (or science) makes of it, and all maps struggle with incongruity.<sup>389</sup>

Greg's flexible approach to language echoed what I heard from a range of religious humanists who embrace hybridity. For those like Peter and his "Ethical" son, religious humanism is never simply both/and, secular and religious; it is also neither/nor, neither fully religious nor fully secular. Janet, one of the leaders of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, described this in-betweenness repeatedly throughout our lengthy interview:

The starting point for understanding Humanistic Judaism is to realize that we straddle two worlds. We're not necessarily viewed by some in each world as part of their world. In the Jewish world, we're not quite Jewish enough. In the secular humanist, the atheist, the nontheistic world, we're just a little too religious for a lot of people. The world reacts to us in different ways. Your view depends on whatever world you're a part of.

Janet sees herself as secular, religious, and Jewish, but she also understands that these terms can take on different meanings in different contexts.<sup>390</sup> Because her answers can vary in the type of work they accomplish, she identifies herself and her organization contextually:

Put me in a survey, and how I answer depends on who's doing the survey and whether I want to be considered part of the Jewish community. [...] If they ask questions about God, I'm not going to say, "No, I don't believe in god," but I'm going

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<sup>389</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, "Map is Not Territory," in *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 289-309. See also Tyler Roberts' discussion of Smith's position as a criticism of Mircea Eliade and the Chicago School; Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism After Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).

<sup>390</sup> For a scholarly consideration of the increasingly blurry boundaries of Jewish identity, see Richard Alba, "On the Sociological Significance of the American Jewish Experience: Boundary Blurring, Assimilation, and Pluralism," 67:4 *Sociology of Religion* (Winter 2006): 347-358. Alba's essay appears alongside several other worthy articles relating to Jewish identity in a special issue of *Sociology of Religion* on the National Jewish Population Survey, 2000-2001.



to fall somewhere in that secular outlook because God is irrelevant to how I live my life. If you're a secularist trying to determine how secular the country is, I may give you very different answers. At some level, my responses are based on who's doing the survey and asking the question.

Janet knows that some conservative Jews might not consider her Jewish, while some hardline nonbelievers might not consider her secular. At times, she articulates her identity distinct from their perspectives, and at other times, she allows them to shape her self-understanding. "For a lot of people it's not an issue because the world understands who they are," she told me. But for her, it is an issue, and it influences how she uses language and how she describes herself.

Janet's approach resembles that of Jacques Derrida in a rare passage in which he names himself as an atheist. Reflecting on his Jewish mother's fear of even asking him whether he believes in God, he writes, "she must have known that the constancy of God in my life is called by other names, so that I quite rightly pass for an atheist."<sup>391</sup> Derrida's statement situates him socially, and he acknowledges that through a certain prevailing complex of assumptions, the term "atheist" is an adequate description. Though Derrida embraces just one label in this passage, his body of work underscores the inadequacy and contingency of all naming. Janet also embraces this contingency, but unlike Derrida, she does so by adopting multiple labels (both/and) that she contextually affirms or disavows

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<sup>391</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Circumfession," in *Jacques Derrida*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 155. Also see John D. Caputo's discussion of this passage in *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1997), 288. For a contrasting view of Derrida's relationship to religion, see Mark C. Taylor, *Erring: A Postmodern A/theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

(neither/nor).<sup>392</sup>

Humanistic Judaism, named as such, was established by Rabbi Sherwin T. Wine with the founding of the Birmingham Temple in a suburb of Detroit.<sup>393</sup> The history of nonbelief within Judaism is arguably ancient if one defines it broadly, and Jewish thinkers like Baruch Spinoza, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud are seminal in far narrower framings.<sup>394</sup> Anarchist, labor activist, and Jewish freethinker Emma Goldman was an outspoken atheist in New York City at a time when Ethical Culture was still a young movement and humanism was nascent in the United States.<sup>395</sup> Though Wine places Humanistic Judaism within a long version of Judaism's secular history, he appears to be the first to create an institution that is avowedly both humanistic and Jewish.<sup>396</sup>

Wine founded the Birmingham Temple in 1963 with just eight families, and by 1965, it had grown to more than one hundred forty. In 1969, Wine created the Society for

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<sup>392</sup> For a succinct discussion of the in-between of both/and and neither/nor through the philosophies of Hegel and Kierkegaard, see Mark C. Taylor, "Refiguring Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 77:1 (March 2009): 105-119.

<sup>393</sup> Sherwin T. Wine, "Unbelief within Judaism," in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007), 455.

<sup>394</sup> Spinoza was not an avowed atheist like Marx and Freud, though the pantheism for which he was excommunicated from his synagogue in Amsterdam had a significant influence on freethinkers in succeeding centuries. For an account of the Enlightenment in which Spinoza figures prominently, see Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

<sup>395</sup> Emma Goldman, "The Philosophy of Atheism," originally published in the February 1916 issue of her journal *Mother Earth*, available online at the *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/goldman/works/1916/atheism.htm>, accessed August 20, 2014. For more on Goldman's role in the history of freethought, see Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004), 227-267.

<sup>396</sup> See, for instance, Wine, *Judaism Beyond God: A Radical New Way to Be Jewish* (Farmington Hills, Mich.: Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1985).

Humanistic Judaism (SHJ) to provide a national umbrella organization for ten local groups throughout the country.<sup>397</sup> And as of late 2014, SHJ has nearly thirty local affiliates, down from its peak of over forty.<sup>398</sup> Other groups, such as the Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, work to organize and affiliate communities of secular Jews, but SHJ is the only avowedly Jewish group active in the American secular movement. In turn, SHJ, the UU Humanists, and the American Ethical Union are the only members of the movement's national lobbying organization, the Secular Coalition for America, to register with the Federal government as religious organizations. They straddle the religious and the secular and define their hybrid space. Wine's legacy also leads directly into the "congregational humanism" with which this chapter opened. He trained Greg Epstein, Harvard's Humanist Chaplain and the founder of the Humanist Community at Harvard. Epstein was ordained as a rabbi by Wine's International Institute of Humanistic Judaism, and it was to Wine that he dedicated his first book, *Good Without God*.<sup>399</sup>

Religious humanists embrace the hybridity of the secular and the religious, but they struggle to be recognized in a world that expects them to align with one or the other. Though in some ways holdovers from an earlier religious humanism, the UU Humanist Association and Humanistic Judaism arose at a time when humanism was slowly bifurcating but had yet to do so institutionally. Both organizations located themselves within the ancient traditions of Christianity and Judaism—UU Humanists through their affiliation with UU, and Sherwin Wine through his membership in the Central Conference of

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<sup>397</sup> Uncredited, "The Atheist Rabbi," *Time* 85:5 (January 29, 1965).

<sup>398</sup> Wine, "Unbelief," 455.

<sup>399</sup> Greg Epstein, *Good Without God*, 241.

American Rabbis, the body that governs the Reform rabbinate.<sup>400</sup> In so doing they defined their religiosity as much by tradition as ceremony and community. The American Humanist Association, having severed its explicit ties to a religious tradition, moved in a far more secular direction, though still not completely. The following section examines the schism within AHA that produced a new organization, the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, and introduced a new kind of hybrid to the landscape of organized nonbelief in the United States.

### **Secular Humanism**

Not all humanists embrace hybridity and polysemy in the ways that Peter, Greg, and Janet do. Though many acknowledge the contingency of language and consider debates over the secularity or religiosity of humanism to be mere semantics, they still seek to reassert one understanding or another, and they do so for a range of reasons. While some embrace humanism without joining a local group, others seek to join and create groups that are modeled on religion, but considered secular substitutes. In this final subsection, I examine the rise of explicitly secular humanism, focusing on the major figures, their philosophies, and their ongoing debates. In the next chapter, I provide deeper analysis of the legal disputes that have shaped secular humanism while comparing three recent

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<sup>400</sup> "Atheist Rabbi." The Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the national Reform organization, refused to accept a humanistic congregation in Cincinnati that applied for membership in 1994. Though Wine's nontheism did not lead to his expulsion from the Reform rabbinate, Reform wishes to hold individual humanistic congregations at arm's length. David Gonzalez, "Temple With No Place For God Seeks a Place," *New York Times*, June 11, 1994, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/06/11/nyregion/temple-with-no-place-for-god-seeks-a-place.html>, accessed August 28, 2014.

lawsuits filed by three different nonbeliever organizations in the United States.

A number of events in the late 1960s and early 70s prefigured the founding of an explicitly secular humanism. In 1968, in the wake of a series of lawsuits in which Ethical Culture Societies received recognition as religious groups from State and Federal courts, AHA filed to change its nonprofit status with the IRS from an educational 501(c)3 nonprofit to a religious nonprofit.<sup>401</sup> AHA stated that it made the change in order to enable its ordained clergy to legally solemnize weddings.<sup>402</sup> They also benefited by no longer having to file Form 990, a financial disclosure statement required for all secular tax-exempt nonprofits reporting over an amount of income set by the IRS.<sup>403</sup> As AHA's leadership grew to embrace an increasingly secular form of humanism, their religious status became more controversial. Eventually, in 2007, AHA changed its status back to that of an educational organization, and leaders told me that they self-consciously embraced the term "atheism" in more of their publications.<sup>404</sup>

Another turning point for AHA was the hiring of Paul Kurtz, who became editor of its magazine, *The Humanist*, in the late 1960s. Kurtz would eventually create the first explicitly secular humanist institutions and publications, but while at AHA, he frequently

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<sup>401</sup> See *Fellowship of Humanity v. County of Alameda*, 153 Cal.App.2d 673, 315 P.2d 394 (1957) and *Washington Ethical Society v. District of Columbia*, 101 U.S. App. D.C. 371 (1957).

<sup>402</sup> Roy Speckhardt, "The Humanist Tax Exemption," *Humanist Network News*, February 7, 2007, available at <http://www.americanhumanist.org/hnn/archives/?id=283%20&article=1>, accessed March 12, 2014.

<sup>403</sup> "Having It Both Ways," unattributed article, *Free Inquiry* 22:4 (Fall 2002), 40.

<sup>404</sup> Roy Speckhardt, "The Humanist Tax Exemption," *Humanist Network News*, February 7, 2007, available at <http://www.americanhumanist.org/hnn/archives/?id=283%20&article=1>, accessed March 12, 2014.

partnered with avowedly religious humanists. For example, during the 1970s, he persuaded the American Ethical Union, the umbrella organization to which individual Ethical Societies pay annual dues, to become a joint partner in the publication of *The Humanist*. As editor of an anthology on humanism that he published in 1973, he also included a number of prominent religious humanists, such as Horace Friess, Edward L. Ericson, and Khoren Arisian.<sup>405</sup> According to organizational leaders whom I interviewed who were contemporaries of Kurtz, he did not aim to effect a divide between religious and secular humanism until after he resigned as editor of *The Humanist*.

Though Kurtz partnered with religious humanists while working for AHA, he also took steps to distance himself from their form of humanism. In the epilogue of his 1973 anthology he acknowledges that humanism is difficult to define and “can mean whatever we want it to.” Nevertheless, he then proceeds to argue for his own “normative” definition that excludes avowed humanists like Catholic humanists and certain “orthodox Marxists.”<sup>406</sup> He is explicit about the incompatibility of theism and humanism, though religious humanism can be acceptable:

Humanism cannot in any fair sense of the word apply to one who still believes in God as the source and creator of the universe. Christian Humanism would be possible only for those who are willing to admit that they are atheistic Humanists. It surely does not apply to God-intoxicated believers. (This would not exclude a ‘religious’ Humanism, provided it is a naturalistic nontheism.)

Religious humanism has its place for Kurtz, though notably, with an indefinite article, inside a parenthesis, set off by quotes, and bearing a caveat.

Also in 1973, Kurtz and Edwin H. Wilson wrote and published an updated manifesto,

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<sup>405</sup> Kurtz, *Humanist Alternative*.

<sup>406</sup> Kurtz, “Epilogue,” *Humanist Alternative*, 176-186.

known as Humanist Manifesto II. Wilson was one of the founders of the American Humanist Association and the Fellowship of Religious Humanism, and he was closely involved with the publication of the first Humanist Manifesto in 1933. Despite Wilson's life-long commitment to religious humanism, the document is strongly critical of religion and offers little place for the nontheistic religiosity he helped create:

Some humanists believe we should reinterpret traditional religions and reinvest them with meanings appropriate to the current situation. Such redefinitions, however, often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms; they easily become obscurantist, impeding the free use of the intellect. We need, instead, radically new human purposes and goals.<sup>407</sup>

Wilson's religious humanism is barely present in the document, as Kurtz's nascent secular humanism moves to the fore. Though the second manifesto was signed by many religious humanists, including some who had founded the movement, it affords little place for the religiosity affirmed by its predecessor published forty years earlier. As of 1973, Kurtz tolerated but did not embrace avowedly religious humanism.

Two main factors led to Kurtz's eventual break with AHA: mission and money. In 1976, he founded the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal (CSICOP) under the auspices of *The Humanist* and AHA. CSICOP, later shortened to the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI), is the first skeptic organization in the United States and marks the institutional beginning of the American skeptic movement.<sup>408</sup> According to leaders at AHA, Kurtz's dedication to skepticism and his

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<sup>407</sup> [http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist\\_Manifesto\\_II](http://americanhumanist.org/humanism/Humanist_Manifesto_II)

<sup>408</sup> Kurtz borrowed the idea for the organization and even its name from a Belgian group founded in the wake of WWII, Le Comité Belge pour l'Investigation Scientifique des Phénomènes Réputés Paranormaux; Daniel Loxton, "Why Is There a Skeptical Movement?" *Skeptic*, originally published February 6, 2013, available at

attention to debunking ghosts, aliens, and psychics irked some members of the group's board who wanted him to remain focused on humanism.<sup>409</sup> Rising tensions between Kurtz and several board members eventually led to his ouster.

Kurtz had quadrupled the readership of *The Humanist*, but he was spending heavily to grow circulation and drawing from AHA coffers to do so, with some board members questioning his handling of funds. Kurtz's success as editor had led to a closer financial relationship between AHA and *The Humanist* and precipitated the organization's move to Amherst, New York, where Kurtz was a philosophy professor at SUNY-Buffalo. Following the merger, board members wanted more financial control of the magazine and had the votes they needed to amend its charter. In 1978, with pressure mounting, and amidst accusations of serious financial malfeasance, Kurtz resigned. The board requested he return as editor of *The Humanist* in the fall of the same year, but he and the board were unable to agree to terms. Well liked among members and donors, Kurtz defected with what one AHA leader estimates was half of their members and much of their financial support.

As he did with the founding of CSICOP in 1976, Kurtz recognized that a label attached to an outlook lacked an institutional home. In 1980, he created the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, the name of which was later shortened to the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). Though none of those I spoke to saw the definitional struggle between religious and secular humanists as central to Kurtz's departure, he used that

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<http://www.skeptic.com/downloads/Why-Is-There-a-Skeptical-Movement.pdf>, accessed September 3, 2014.

<sup>409</sup> For the history of the term and practice of "debunking" and its relationship to irreligion in the 1920s, see Edward A. Martin, *H.L. Mencken and the Debunkers* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1984).



conflict to justify the creation of his new organization and his new journal, *Free Inquiry*. By founding CSI and CSH, Kurtz centralized nebulous movements, giving potential members an organization to join and donors a group to support. CSI and CSH now reside under the Center for Inquiry, an umbrella organization Kurtz founded in 1991 that is currently the largest nonbeliever organization in the country if measured by staff or annual budget. After 1980, avowedly *secular* humanists could have an institution all their own.

By defining his organization as explicitly secular, over-against religion, Kurtz took on the challenge of religious pollution explored at length in the previous chapter. He needed a Secular Humanist Declaration that is not a creed, an institution that is not a religion, and a philosophy that is not a doctrine. He needed to lead his organizations without appearing authoritarian or dogmatic. One of the ways he accomplished this purification is by analogy. Kurtz adopted an expressly functionalist understanding of religious substitution:

I readily grant that, where mainline religious denominations have built what were in fact secular communities of friends, they have satisfied important psychological-sociological needs, often without imposing authoritarian overlays. Secular humanists can learn much from the denominations about the need to build communities. But secular humanists differ from the religious in that they are unable to make the leap of faith required to believe in the messianic message of the ancient prophets, even if reinterpreted in metaphorical or symbolic language.<sup>410</sup>

According to Kurtz, there are persistent “psychological-sociological needs” that religion meets. Secular humanists must create secular replacements that meet the same needs as religious structures by serving the same functions. They are purified by analogy.

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<sup>410</sup> Paul Kurtz, “Creating Secular and Humanist Alternatives to Religion,” in *Multi-Secularism: A New Agenda* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2010): 131. The essay was originally published under the same title in *Free Inquiry*, Volume 26, Number 5, August/September 2006.

For this analogizing project to be successful, secular humanists must be wary of religious pollution like groupthink, authoritarianism, and evangelism. Local secular humanist communities, CFI's international hierarchy, and the philosophy of Paul Kurtz can all serve religion-like functions, but only because they have been sanctioned as sufficiently secular. For decades, the size and influence of CFI made Kurtz and *Free Inquiry* the primary authorities that prescribed the acceptable and unacceptable forms of secular humanism. Following Kurtz's ouster from CFI in 2010 and his death in 2012, new leadership has encouraged the organization to work with other groups throughout the United States. Though "secular humanism" is still closely associated with Kurtz among organized nonbelievers, members of other groups like AHA and the Secular Student Alliance can lay claim to the term if they choose. Its future remains uncertain.

### **Conclusion: Patching Wineskins**

In the summer of 2012, I attended a student leadership conference at CFI's headquarters in Amherst, New York, just outside of Buffalo. Kurtz was a professor in SUNY-Buffalo's Department of Philosophy from 1965 until 1991, the year he founded CFI. Kurtz was in Amherst, so CFI and most of its sister-organizations are, too. The conference organizers paid me a warm welcome when I asked to participate, and when I arrived at CFI's headquarters, I picked up a binder with my name on it. The binder also bore the conference's striking logo. On the left side were the words ATHEISM, HUMANISM, REASON, INQUIRY, SCIENCE, SECULARISM, FREETHOUGHT, AND SKEPTICISM, in all-caps, arranged vertically. From top to bottom, red to blue, they were colored with the visible spectrum: a

rainbow. Colored lines leading out from the words, from left to right, unified into a single beam of white light, which led to the right side of the logo, where it met CFI's name and the title of the event: CENTER FOR INQUIRY | LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 2012. The symbolism was clever, and its meaning was clear. On the final day of the conference, all the participants were given t-shirts bearing the conference logo, which we were encouraged to wear on a trip to Niagara Falls. Before handing out the t-shirts, one of the conference organizers explained the logo as "full spectrum enlightenment." "We're not going to solve these problems with any one aspect of strong, positive, reality-based thinking," she told us. "We need to come together to create this white light, this enlightenment of thought."

CFI's attempt to unify the various strands of organized nonbelief is a longstanding ecumenical project among nonbelievers, but one that varies in its motivations. Some groups, like the Secular Student Alliance (SSA), seek a suitable umbrella category for the labels that nonbelievers have invented and rallied around for centuries. SSA wants students to label their groups as they see fit and then affiliate with the national organization. Other groups are looking to return to a more basic form of an established label in order to unify battling factions, such as recent attempts by humanists to drop "religious" and "secular" qualifiers, which I discussed early on in this chapter.<sup>411</sup> Leaders at FFRF told me they had similar motivations for recovering the nineteenth-century term "freethought," since it had once rallied disparate groups to a handful of shared causes. CFI's

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<sup>411</sup> This unification of humanism is itself an old project. See H.J. Blackham, "A Definition of Humanism," in *The Humanist Alternative* (Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1973), 35: "I deprecate any definition of Humanism that mutilates it with an epithet—'ethical', 'scientific', 'religious'. For this gives exclusive or special right to a selected aspect of human life and maims the body of all-around Humanist concern with human being."

conference logo is ambivalent in that it could represent an effort like SSA's to rally existing groups into a neutral umbrella, or it could represent an attempt to speak for all nonbelievers, however they self-identify. The group's unification of the spectrum of "Enlightenment" is consistent with Kurtz's decades-long efforts to annex other groups and remain the dominant voice in secular activism. Under its new leadership, CFI must decide the sense in which it seeks to unify.

Factions, labels, and organizations have always proliferated among organized nonbelievers, and new groups with new names appear frequently. One such faction has recently rallied around the name Atheism+ (pronounced, "atheism-plus"). Originating from the internet rather than in-real-life (IRL), Atheism+ is an attempt to rally nonbelievers who want to emphasize social justice, and specifically, issues concerning misogyny and sexism.<sup>412</sup> The term was coined by blogger Jennifer McCreight, a secular activist whose "Boobquake" meme catalyzed conversations about feminism in the secular and skeptic communities.<sup>413</sup> While many online activists have been quick to support the nascent sub-movement, most of those I spoke with who work primarily IRL considered the term yet another division in an already factious movement. As a humanist leader named Justin told me, "We have been talking about these ideas for a very long time." Another leader named

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<sup>412</sup> For a recapitulation of the movement's founding and its central concerns, see Greta Christina, "Fierce Humanism," *The Humanist* 72:6 (2012), 30-31, 47.

<sup>413</sup> Jennifer McCreight, "How I Unwittingly Infiltrated the Boys Club & Why It's Time for a New Wave of Atheism," *Blag Hag*, August 18, 2012, available at <http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag/2012/08/how-i-unwittingly-infiltrated-the-boys-club-why-its-time-for-a-new-wave-of-atheism/>, accessed March 20, 2015. See also Jennifer McCreight, "How I Started Boobquake," *The Daily Beast*, April 27, 2010, available at <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/04/27/how-i-started-a-boobquake.html>, accessed March 20, 2015.

Todd,<sup>414</sup> who is a major donor to secular activism, expressed his frustration more bluntly: “This whole Atheism+ thing is just the latest example of, “Let’s come up with this new label and intentionally try to be divisive about it.” All these people online are saying, “You’re either with us or against us,” but how is [Atheism+] in any way different from humanism?”<sup>415</sup>

During an interview at his office, a leader named Jonathon described the landscape of nonbeliever organizations in terms “market segmentation.” He told me that under past leadership, his group was “a big umbrella atheist organization... and the other organizations in the movement were also doing the same kind of thing.” According to Jonathon, this spurred a lot of competition among the various groups because they were all trying to occupy the same niche: a broad one. Jonathon’s group shifted its strategy in recent years when it came under new leadership. “Some atheists are accommodationists,” he told me. “Some atheists want to work with religion to defeat hunger or the hypocrisy in the government. That’s all good, but that’s not what we do. We’re the hardasses.” His group has “targeted” itself to a more hardline “segment of the population” because it wants “to be that portion of the market.” He believes this approach has been key for improving relations among the organizations:

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<sup>414</sup> Todd is Todd Stiefel’s real name. He requested expressly that I not give him a pseudonym.

<sup>415</sup> Others activists writing online have made the same point: Libby Anne, “‘Humanism’ and ‘Atheism+’: What’s the Difference?” *Love, Joy, Feminism*, August 20, 2012, available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/lovejoyfeminism/2012/08/whats-the-difference-between-humanism-and-atheism.html>, accessed October 19, 2012; James Croft, “What Humanism Is—and Isn’t,” August 22, 2012, available at <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/templeofthefuture/2012/08/what-humanism-is-and-isnt/>, accessed October 19, 2012.

What that has done, first of all, it has galvanized our membership because we now know what we are. The membership knows what we are. They identify a market segment with us. They identify a movement segment with us. At the same time, it has reduced the feeling of competition in the market. All of a sudden, I'm not [competing with these other organizations anymore]. They do different things than we do. So all of a sudden, these organizations that used to be our competitors are our friends. That has allowed me to build and strengthen bridges that otherwise were shaky or nonexistent.

At least in part, Jonathon attributes increasing cooperation among the groups to the consolidation of several groups' distinct identities. They have become pluralized and available for selection as if on a menu.

Jonathan, Todd, and a few other leaders have also tried to rally nonbelievers on the SSA model by encouraging individuals to use the labels they prefer, but not at the expense of partnerships. Several of these activists told me that they see no incompatibility among the labels, which merely describe different aspects of the same whole. When I interviewed a secular activist named Tim who works for a small nonbeliever organization with a national presence, he rattled off an impressive synthesis:

All these labels are overlapping. I don't know any secular humanists who aren't also atheists. I don't know any humanists who aren't also freethinkers. I don't know any atheists who don't have some humanist values. I'm an atheist, an agnostic, a humanist, and a freethinker. I'm an atheist because there are no gods. I'm an agnostic because I'm not sure, and no one is. I'm a humanist because my values come from mutual responsibility for others and from recognizing that there's no supernatural power. Freethought means being independent of an organized authority.

A secular activist named Charles, who works for the Secular Student Alliance, offered me a similar synthesis:

I'm an atheist because there is no God or gods. I'm an agnostic because the question of a transcendental creator can't have a verifiable answer. I'm a humanist in terms of how I live my life and in my basic values. I'm a naturalist in terms of thinking about

how to understand the natural world. These are all useful terms, and they describe different things. They're not mutually exclusive.

Todd's organization, the Stiefel Freethought Foundation, and SSA are two of the four groups that initially organized the Openly Secular Coalition, an organization that encourages nonbelievers to "come out" *qua* nonbelievers, regardless of the labels they adopt.<sup>416</sup> "Secular" has become a loose umbrella—not a primary identity, but a secondary one that cuts across the various groups, including both the religious and the nonreligious.

In tandem with chapter one, this chapter has demonstrated why some nonbelievers consider themselves religious and others want nothing to do with religion, not even the word. Leaders who want to avoid religious pollution need to break with their tradition by re-narrating it, and they can silo their groups, protecting them from religion and secular religious hybrids. Leaders who want to partner with other groups can draw on a narrative of their shared past and adopt more capacious labels like "humanism," "nontheists," "secular," or in some definitions, "freethought." These terms help them create bridges among nonbelievers, and in the case of "humanism" and sometimes "secular," they allow groups to partner with those who understand themselves as religious. One subset of leaders has emphasized the need for groups to occupy separate market segments, and another subset has recently downplayed the importance of labels in an attempt to unify disparate factions within what they consider a single social movement. The next two chapters examine how the distinctions and elisions that are so important to most organized nonbelievers engage with a wider public through arenas of authority like the courts and the

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<sup>416</sup> See "Who We Are," *Openly Secular Coalition*, available at <http://www.openlysecular.org/about>, accessed March 20, 2015.

other branches of government. Chapter three examines three recent lawsuits to better understand how nonbelievers and the law co-constitute understandings of the secular and the religious, and chapter four examines how secular lobbyists make use of various understandings of the secular and secularism to partner with religious groups while strengthening their nontheistic base.



### CHAPTER 3: The Challenge of Being Secular

Are nonbelievers a religious minority in the United States? As the previous chapters have shown, the answer to this question likely depends on the type of nonbeliever. For instance, inasmuch as humanists today are less likely to consider themselves religious, humanists in general are more likely to answer in the negative than they would have a century ago. This chapter continues to adopt a perspectivist and constructionist approach to the question of who is religious and who is secular, but rather than focus on the debates among nonbelievers, it examines the relationship between nonbelievers and America's courts. Do the courts favor the self-understanding of groups that want to purify themselves of the religious, or do they affirm a more hybrid understanding of the secular/religious divide that allows ostensibly secular Americans to receive the benefits and protections of their religious neighbors? To answer these questions, this chapter focuses on three recent lawsuits, each filed by a different American nonbeliever organization, and each asking the courts to recognize its particular way of being secular.

Organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) fight an uphill battle to avoid being recognized as religious by the courts and the other branches of American government. Their dilemma extends from the courts' consistent treatment of religion as "special," i.e., set apart from the secular world and deserving of special prohibitions and protections.<sup>417</sup> FFRF's ongoing legal strategy targets the specialness of

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<sup>417</sup> On the question of whether the courts ought to consider religion special, see Micah Schwartzman, "What If Religion Is Not Special?" *The University of Chicago Law Review* 79:4 (Fall 2012): 1351-1427. On the specialness of religion since 1947 and its relationship to taxpayer standing, see Richard Albert, "The Constitutional Politics of the Establishment

religion by demanding that the courts treat religious and secular nonprofits equally. The group successfully argued in a lower court that it was not religious and was thus unfairly injured by its inability to receive a tax break available only to religious nonprofits.

Motivated by a clever legal strategy adopted by federal attorneys, a higher court ruled that in order to have standing FFRF must file for the religious exemption, thereby testing whether the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) would consider it a religious group. In order to prove *actual* injury—as opposed to *hypothetical*—FFRF must show that it was denied the tax break on account of its being a secular nonprofit.

This demand puts the group in a catch-22 because it must go against its secular founding principles to claim a religious benefit. Moreover, federal attorneys have already warned FFRF that the IRS might actually grant it the benefit by considering it a religious group. The Freedom From Religion Foundation must pollute itself with the religious in order to continue to pursue its legal strategy of challenging the specialness of religion. If

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Clause,” *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 87:3 (2012), 867-897. On the contradictions that arise from the specialness of religion in the courts and its definitional incoherence, see Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005). For a discussion of the ostensibly theological decisions the specialness of religion requires the courts to make, see Jakob de Roover, “Secular Law and the Realm of False Religion,” in *After Secular Law*, eds. Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, Robert Yelle, and Mateo Taussig-Rubbo (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 43-61. On the specialness of religion and religious things more generally, see Ann Taves, *Religious Experience Reconsidered* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009). Taves has since moved away from this language, preferring instead a two-stage process of salience and significance. Those things that are salient stand out enough to be remarked and potentially become special, but they only become religious once they take on significance. That religious studies scholars and the courts should both seek creative ways to continue to understand religion as in some way special is an entanglement deserving of further analysis. In her critical review of *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom*, Lisa Nicolosi observes that Sullivan is no less an agent in the creation of religion’s specialness than the Florida judge at the center of her study: *The Freedom Center Journal* 2:1 (Spring 2010): 47-54.

the Federal Government were to grant FFRF religious status and begin to recognize it as a religious organization, the group's religious pollution would become legally sanctioned. Claiming itself to be a religious organization on the chance that the IRS will find it purely secular is not a risk that the group wants to take.

Organizations like the American Humanist Association (AHA) self-consciously straddle the divide between secular and religious, claiming a secular nonprofit status with the IRS while asking the courts to consider them religious for the purposes of equal protection under the law. AHA's legal strategy affirms that religion is special, but it demands that the courts' definition of religion become more capacious so that it can contain its particular form of secular/religious hybridity. Like other nonbeliever groups, AHA is testing the boundaries of individual free exercise in its ongoing struggle to get standing for its lawsuits. The organization has also adopted a novel strategy of pursuing protections under the Fourteenth Amendment and its Equal Protection Clause or state-level equivalents, thereby moving away from the First Amendment altogether. Thus at the same time that AHA is embracing the language of "atheism" and moving away from a "religious" self-understanding that it has carried since its founding, it is also moving away from the Religion Clauses of the Federal Constitution and toward a more "secular" Amendment, albeit one that incorporated the Free Exercise and Establishment Clauses in 1940 and 1947, respectively.<sup>418</sup> Though AHA's demand that the courts consider it religious is inconsistent with its self-understanding and aspects of its legal strategy, the courts have thus far affirmed the group's religious status.

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<sup>418</sup> *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296 (1940). *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

More avowedly religious groups like the American Ethical Union stand apart. Because they have argued consistently and successfully that they are religious, the courts and the IRS do not recognize them as hybrid. The law understands them as they understand themselves: clearly on the side of the religious, regardless of whether they also consider themselves secular or participate in secular activism. As discussed in the last chapter, their secular/religious hybridity only manifests from certain perspectives and under certain conditions. These organizations' hybridity is most apparent when they engage in secular activism and in the construction of a secular identity—for instance, when they act as members of the Secular Coalition for America, a lobbying organization for “nontheists” examined in this dissertation’s fourth chapter.

As observed in chapter two, the Center for Inquiry attempts to purify itself of the religious by analogy. In the third and final lawsuit that this chapter considers, CFI continues to work within a long history of functionalism, asking the courts to consider its trained secular celebrants to be *like* clergy in order to officiate wedding ceremonies. By extension, CFI asks the courts to consider it to be *like* a religious group solely for the purposes of the law, and without actually calling it “religious.” CFI’s founding of institutional secular humanism by way of a break from religious humanism necessitates its demand for being *like* a religious group but *not religious*. Whereas a lower court has refused to allow CFI to have its cake and eat it, too, a higher court of appeals has granted the group its functional equivalence to clergy, and through a legal sanction of analogy has become an agent in CFI’s secular purification.

Though a careful textual analysis of legal arguments might imply that the challenge

of being secular is legalistic and semantic, as the previous chapters have shown, the struggle over the secular is quotidian and ontological. Reserving judgment as to whether nonbelievers' claims of discrimination are on par with those of other persecuted minorities,<sup>419</sup> this chapter builds on the previous two chapters by emphasizing the particular challenges faced by nonbelievers aiming to affirm a secular self-understanding and achieve a secular identity by purifying themselves of the religious. Because American courts offer more rights to religious nonprofits than secular ones, because the courts and other branches of government sometimes insist on recognizing a group as religious despite its claims to the contrary, and because there is rich legal precedent for nonbeliever organizations successfully claiming status as religious organizations, this chapter argues that it is challenging for nonbelievers in the United States to be recognized as secular in the sense of nonreligious. In the theory and methodology adopted in this dissertation, "religious" and "secular" are names given from a particular perspective inasmuch as religious and secular are not universal or essential attributes, but rather, labels efficaciously applied for specific reasons, be it by scholars, lawyers, judges, or bureaucrats. Arenas of authority like universities and the courts become arbiters of what *is*, and their recognition can affirm or undermine a claim to *being* secular or religious. It is important to remember that for the members of the Freedom From Religion Foundation, secular and religious are not merely pawns in a Wittgensteinian language game. These labels lie at the heart of a debate over who and what they *are*.

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<sup>419</sup> Organized nonbelievers have debated this question among themselves. See DJ Grothe and Austin Dacey, "Atheism is Not a Civil Rights Issue," *Free Inquiry*, *Free Inquiry* 24:2 (2004): 50-51. Also see Eddie Tabash's response, "Atheism is Indeed a Struggling for Equality before the Law Civil Rights Issue," 24:4 (2004): 44-45.

The “ontological challenge” of being secular re-emphasizes the importance of participating in Talal Asad’s “more modest endeavor: An inquiry into what is involved when 'the secular' is invoked—who tries to define it, in what context, how, and why” (2011:673). This rigorous perspectivism points to the possibility of multiple working ontologies grounded in a range of sometimes contradictory perspectives.<sup>420</sup> By demonstrating how someone or something comes to *be* secular, and by attending to the stakes involved in such ontological claims, the secular and the religious are refigured as ontologically contingent and undergoing reconstruction in a contested field.

### **Three Ways of Being Secular**

#### **1. Secular, but Not Religious: The Freedom From Religion Foundation**

As discussed in chapter one, the Freedom from Religion Foundation is the most litigious nonbeliever organization in the United States, and it has a strong aversion to religious pollution. At any given time the group is engaged in around a dozen lawsuits, and

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<sup>420</sup> The approach I adopt to the construction of the secular is similar in its most basic premises to that of Graham Harman’s “Object-oriented ontology,” though I am less concerned than Harman with what *really is*. Baudrillard’s hyper-reality and Harman’s ontology—whether everything is representation and there is no underlying real, or representations are real in addition to the underlying real—are two sides of the same coin. I eschew Harman’s approach for the same reason I avoid the new materialism: his theoretical lens demands the adoption of its jargon, which obscures the objects it supposedly allows us to see more clearly. See Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002) and *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009). On the new materialism, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010). For a discussion of ontology as a genre and the contingency of ontological discourse, see Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. by Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988). Lyotard is conspicuously absent from Harman’s work and from discussions of the so-called materialist turn.

as of early 2015, its staff includes more than half a dozen attorneys. Though FFRF recently completed an expansion of Freethought Hall—the group’s headquarters in Madison, Wisconsin—space was still tight when I visited in late 2012. Standing in the reception area when I first arrived, I peeked into a backroom that appeared to be full of lawyers whose photos I recognized from the group’s website. My guess was confirmed a few minutes later when Janine, one of FFRF’s leaders, gave me a brief tour of the Hall’s cramped and bustling ground floor. Despite the group’s rapid growth since 2007, they still strain to keep up with the thousands of requests for assistance that they receive annually. After pausing for a few minutes to sign a series of documents, Janine apologized and modestly assured me, “Normally we’re not this busy.”

During the breaks in our conversation, my attention turned to a side-room near the front of the building in which a college-aged woman was talking on the phone. Her tone was calm and direct, though she was clearly in the middle of an argument with someone who had called to complain about the organization. When transcribing the interview, I found that I had picked up snippets of her voice during a few moments of silence. “Our country is representative. It’s not a tyranny of the majority. It’s a democracy,” she declared. Soon after, she offered to mail the caller some information about religious tax exemptions. A conversation at the reception desk drowned out her voice for the next minute and a half, but then I could hear her asking in that same calm, direct tone, “And what do they do, go and molest little boys? Well what do you think about that?” I recall the box of “Happy Heretic” t-shirts against the wall, the “Friendly Neighborhood Atheist” buttons, and the billboards with slogans like, “The world, without religion, is beautiful.” Everyone I met at

FFRF was kind and polite, but the group's message is clear: we don't like religion.

### **A Secular Government, Purified of Religion**

Anne Nicol and Annie Laurie Gaylor founded FFRF to fight for a specific cause. In 1976, the Gaylors objected to Christian prayers being recited during the meetings of the Madison City Council and the Dane County Board. In a bid to make their protest more official by giving it the backing of an organization, the Gaylors coined the name "Freedom From Religion Foundation." Both the City Council and the County Board ceased reciting prayers soon after the Gaylors launched their protest, and the victory brought FFRF instant attention. Two years later, in 1978, they registered the group as a nonprofit and made an effort to become a national organization with members in every state. Today, FFRF's espoused mission is twofold: to defend the separation of church and state and to promote nontheism. When I implied during an interview that the group is mostly known for the legal half of its mission, one leader was quick to correct me and emphasized that both halves are in the group's bylaws and receive equal attention. Like the Secular Coalition for America, an organization I examine in depth in the following chapter, FFRF unifies secularism as "the separation of church and state" and secularism as "the ideology of nonbelief" into a single mission captured well by another of the organization's billboard slogans: "We are united, and growing, in Secularism."

FFRF's litigious legacy precedes its founding by more than a decade. Before breaking with the organization on bad terms in the mid-1970s, Anne Nicol Gaylor was a trusted lieutenant in Madalyn Murray O'Hair's organization, American Atheists (AA). A vestige of



that split arose obliquely during my interview with Janine, who implied that AA is suspiciously creedal in its membership requirements:

Many people asked Anne Nicol to go national at a time when American Atheists was the only other national game in town. And at that time in order to join you had to send a coupon saying, "I am an American Atheist," and you had to sign it. And a lot of people, even if they were atheists, didn't like that idea and wanted there to be an alternative. For many reasons. But FFRF wanted a group that Thomas Paine could've felt comfortable joining. And you know, we have a few Deists in the classical sense of the Enlightenment. That's fine so long as they know that our members, the majority, of course do not believe in a God. We think freethought is a nice umbrella.

Janine considered FFRF's founding to be a direct response to AA, and she declined to even acknowledge the existence of older, hybrid groups like the American Ethical Union and the American Humanist Association.

O'Hair founded American Atheists in the wake of her landmark Supreme Court victory in 1963, *Murray v. Curlett*.<sup>421</sup> The plaintiff in *Murray* was O'Hair's son, William J. Murray, who objected to mandatory Bible reading in his public school, and with his mother's support, filed a lawsuit to stop it. Then known as Madalyn Murray, O'Hair had been involved for several years with various atheist and freethinking groups, and to support her son's case, she founded an organization of her own in 1962: the Maryland Committee for the Separation of Church and State.<sup>422</sup> The lower courts ruled against Murray, but the case gained new life when the Supreme Court agreed to hear an appeal. In 1963, the Court consolidated *Murray* with *Abington v. Schempp*, a Bible reading lawsuit that the Schempps had won in a lower court before it was appealed by the Abington Township

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<sup>421</sup> *Abington School District v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett* 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

<sup>422</sup> Bryan Le Beau, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O'Hair* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 76.

School District.<sup>423</sup> Unlike the avowedly atheist Murrays who used the case to draw publicity to themselves and their organization, the Schempps were Unitarians who tried to avoid public attention, though they were photographed reading the Bible together in their living room the day before the Supreme Court heard arguments in their case.<sup>424</sup>

The Court's decision in *Schempp* declared Bible reading in public schools unconstitutional, and in the words of Justice Clark's majority opinion, opened the door for "study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education."<sup>425</sup> In the years immediately following the decision, departments of Religious Studies sprang up at colleges and universities throughout the United States, and the study of religion flourished as never before.<sup>426</sup> That same year, the National Association of Bible Instructors became the American Academy of Religion, which along with the far older Society for Biblical Literature, remains the most important membership organization for religion scholars in the United States.<sup>427</sup> The significance of the case for the discipline of Religious Studies was acknowledged on its fiftieth anniversary at a conference hosted by

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<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 98-99. Justice Clark treated both cases as equally important in his majority opinion. O'Hair was infuriated that the *Schempp* case was the case of record when the two were combined. She suggested that the antipathy of the Court's clerk toward atheists was the real reason for *Schempp* receiving nominal priority.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 99. For more on the Schempp family, who were the five plaintiffs in the suit, see Douglas Laycock, "Edward Schempp and His Family," *Journal of Supreme Court History* 38:1 (2013): 63-79.

<sup>425</sup> *Schempp* at 374 U.S. 225.

<sup>426</sup> Kathryn O. Alexander, "Religious Studies in American Higher Education Since *Schempp*: A Bibliographic Essay," *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 71:2/3 The Santa Barbara Colloquy: Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone (1988): 389-412.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 391.

Indiana University in the fall of 2013.<sup>428</sup> Especially when working from within the discipline of Religious Studies, an inquiry into the secular so often turns back upon itself. *Murray* and *Abington* are two of many common ancestors shared by the researcher and the researched in the secular's long genealogy.

In the wake of the *Curlett/Schempp* decision, O'Hair received gifts of land, money, and other resources to support her growing operation and capitalize on her nascent celebrity. In July of 1963, two weeks after the decision, she incorporated a second organization with a similar name: the Maryland Committee for State/Church Separation.<sup>429</sup> This version of the Maryland Committee would eventually morph into American Atheists, Inc., though not before a series of battles and mergers involving other groups that O'Hair founded or joined.<sup>430</sup> Though the Gaylors had started FFRF as an institutional cover for their protest activities in 1976, it was the elder Gaylor's expulsion from AA in 1978 that provided the catalyst for the group's official incorporation that same year. FFRF's early membership comprised many former AA members who were fed up with O'Hair's aggressive and often divisive leadership.<sup>431</sup> Fifteen years after *Schempp*, FFRF was born out of a legacy of factionalism, hardline atheism, and legal activism.

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<sup>428</sup> *Schempp Conference at Indiana University*, <http://indiana.edu/~relstud/news/schempp>, accessed February 27, 2015. For reflections written by some of the participants, see the accompanying *Schempp* blog: [http://indiana.edu/~relstud/news/schempp\\_blog](http://indiana.edu/~relstud/news/schempp_blog), accessed February 27, 2015.

<sup>429</sup> Le Beau, 103.

<sup>430</sup> E.g., *Other Americans*, among others; see *ibid.*, 117-118.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-85.

### ***Freedom From Religion Foundation v. Lew***

Consistent with its origins, FFRF wants nothing to do with “religion,” and its aversion to religious pollution forms the basis of its ongoing legal strategy. The remainder of this section examines a recent lawsuit—*Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. v. Lew*—that FFRF won in federal court and then lost on appeal.<sup>432</sup> Aided by interviews with the organization’s leaders and attorneys, I analyze documents and decisions from the lawsuit as it made its way through the courts. Considered alongside two other recent lawsuits, the analysis of which comprises the remainder of this chapter, *FFRF v. Lew* highlights the ongoing challenge of being secular in the United States and provides a case study that outlines the stakes and consequences of a particular way of understanding the secular’s relationship to religion.

First filed as *Freedom From Religion Foundation v. Geithner* in September 2011, *Lew* challenged a law that gives a federal income tax exemption to ministers who receive a housing allowance as part of their pay. Written into the Internal Revenue Code (IRC) in 1921, the statute creating a housing allowance for ministers was part of a larger exemption for employees who need to live in employer-owned housing, secular or religious. In 1954, the ministerial allowance was clarified and expanded as Section 107 of the IRC, which now reads as follows:

In the case of a minister of the gospel, gross income does not include—  
(1) the rental value of a home furnished to him as part of his compensation; or  
(2) the rental allowance paid to him as part of his compensation, to the extent used by him to rent or provide a home and to the extent such allowance does not exceed

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<sup>432</sup> *Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. v. Lew* 773 F.3d 815 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2014).

the fair rental value of the home, including furnishings and appurtenances such as a garage, plus the cost of utilities.<sup>433</sup>

The addition of 107(2) created a federal tax exemption for the portion of any minister's gross income earmarked by her employer as a housing allowance, regardless of whether she lives on property owned by the church.<sup>434</sup> The bill that created 107(2) states that it "removed the discrimination in existing law" against "those ministers who are not furnished a parsonage."<sup>435</sup> Prior to 1954, only those ministers who lived in church-owned housing could benefit from the exemption, though the same was true for anyone living in employer-owned housing, including employees of secular, for-profit companies.<sup>436</sup> The 1954 revision created a special exemption that applies *only* to ministers, which effectively creates a tax break on the housing costs of all clergy and their equivalents in other religions.<sup>437</sup>

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<sup>433</sup> This portion of the IRC is available online at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/26/107>, accessed March 25, 2015.

<sup>434</sup> Jonathan T. McCants, "The Ministerial Housing Allowance in the Dock," *Taxation of Exempts* 22:3 (2010): 44-48.

<sup>435</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 44. See S. Rep't No. 83-1622, 83d Cong., 2d Sess., 1954 WL 6064; H. Rep't 83-1337, 83d Cong., 2d Sess., 1954 WL 6063.

<sup>436</sup> Section 119 of the IRC outlines non-religious exemptions for those who receive a housing allowance as part of their pay.

<sup>437</sup> Federal Attorneys observe as much in a fascinating footnote in their Appellate Brief in *Lew*: "Although § 107 'is phrased in Christian terms' to apply to a 'minister of the gospel,' 'Congress did not intend to exclude those persons who are the equivalent of 'ministers' in other religions.' *Salkov v. Commissioner*, 46 T.C. 190, 194 (1966) (holding that a Jewish cantor was a 'minister of the gospel'). The Commissioner interprets 'religion' to include 'beliefs (for example, Taoism, Buddhism, and Secular Humanism) that do not posit the existence of a Supreme Being.' Internal Revenue Manual § 7.25.3.6.5(2) (Feb. 23, 1999). Moreover, the employer need not be a church or religious organization, as long as the minister is compensated for ministerial services. Treas. Reg. § 1.1402(c)-5(c)(2) (26 C.F.R.)."

1954 was also the year in which Congress inserted “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance and three years before “In God We Trust” became the national motto and began appearing on all paper currency. Elected in 1952, President Dwight D. Eisenhower continued where President Harry S. Truman had left off, promoting Christian religion both at home and abroad as a conscious effort to combat “godless communism.”<sup>438</sup> Eisenhower spoke frankly about the aim of the 1954 amendment to the pledge and placed it in the context of the Cold War:

Man everywhere is appalled by the prospect of atomic war. In this somber setting, this law and its effects today have profound meaning. In this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America’s heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country’s most powerful resource, in peace or war.<sup>439</sup>

The Cold War provided the impetus for a new American political theology, which in turn, spurred more Americans to religious participation than ever before or since. Though somewhat unsurprising given the tremendous resources that Truman, Eisenhower, and other state officials dedicated to promoting American religiosity, the 1950s and early 60s were the high-water marks for both religious belonging and religious attendance in the United States.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Thomas Aiello, “Constructing Godless Communism: Religion, Politics, and Popular Culture, 1954-1960,” *Americana: The Journal of American Popular Culture, 1900 to Present* 4:1 (2005). See also William Inboden, *Religion and American Foreign Policy, 1945-1960: The Soul of Containment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>439</sup> Quoted in T. Jeremy Gunn, *Spiritual Weapons: The Cold War and the Forging of an American National Religion* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2009), 2. See Statement by the President Upon Signing Bill To Include the Words “Under God” in the Pledge to the Flag, June 14, 1954 (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=9920>). See also 100 Cong. Rec., 83rd Cong. 2nd Sess. (1954), 8618.

<sup>440</sup> Mark Chaves, *Congregations in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 3. For a visual representation of this rise and fall of American religiosity in the mid-

In the complaint it filed with the court, FFRF recognized the Cold War context explicitly:

Section 107 was adopted in 1954, as a reaction to the Cold War antipathy to atheism, and it was intended to subsidize, promote, endorse, favor, and advance churches, religious organizations, and "ministers of the gospel;" by contrast, §107 also discriminates against the individual plaintiffs who cannot receive the same tax benefits because they are not practicing religious clergy.<sup>441</sup>

The organization argued that it is a secular nonprofit that gives its co-directors, Annie Laurie Gaylor and Dan Barker, a housing allowance, and it ought to be able to receive the same tax benefits that a religious nonprofit receives, despite being secular. A leader I interviewed at FFRF told me that the organization began giving its co-directors a housing allowance several years before they filed the suit so that they could establish clear standing as plaintiffs.

The group's ongoing legal strategy lies at the core of its complaint: FFRF does not want the courts to treat religion as special, and it is not willing to label itself as or like a religious organization in order to receive special treatment. To borrow the language of its complaint, "Section 107 of the Revenue Code provides preferential benefits to 'ministers of the gospel,'" which are "not neutrally available to other taxpayers."<sup>442</sup> According to estimates of federal tax expenditures prepared by the Staff of the Joint Committee on Taxation, the estimated total value of "housing allowances for ministers" in 2014 alone is

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twentieth century, see Elesha Coffman, "Religious Decline in America? The Answer Depends on Your Timeline," *Religion News Service: Corner of Church and State*, <http://tobingrant.religionnews.com/2015/01/21/religious-decline-america-answer-depends-timeframe/>, accessed February 28, 2015.

<sup>441</sup> *Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. v. Timothy Geithner*, No. 11-CV-626 (W.D. Wis. 2011) at 20.

<sup>442</sup> *Ibid.*, at 38 and 39.

roughly \$700 million.<sup>443</sup> Any real threat to declare Section 107 of the IRC unconstitutional has high stakes for ministers, churches, and the Federal Government.

Though it would cost the government tax revenue to consider FFRF a religious organization, being secular proved to be an ontological challenge. In June of 2013, federal attorneys filed a brief in which they argued that Gaylor and Barker could be considered “ministers of the gospel” and thus in fact eligible for the allowance from which they claim to be excluded as a secular nonprofit:

Because atheism has been considered a religion, it is possible that an atheist might qualify for status as a “minister” under § 107(2). Ms. Gaylor and Mr. Barker, by their own descriptions, provide an example of atheists who engage in the profusion of certain beliefs which occupy a “place parallel to that filled by . . . God in traditionally religious persons,” and controlling an organization that has “taken a position on divinity.”<sup>444</sup>

The attorneys go on to observe that “there is no basis to conclude that an organization formed around nontheistic beliefs could not qualify as a religious organization,” and they quote from a deposition in which Barker, a former Christian minister states, “[I do] much of what I used to do as a minister, but now for a totally different message, for a nonminister of the gospel type of message.”<sup>445</sup>

The attorneys aimed to demonstrate that FFRF lacked standing as an injured party in its suit because it had not yet attempted to file for the housing allowance as a religious organization. By building the case that Gaylor and Barker might receive the allowance if

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<sup>443</sup> The Joint Committee on Taxation, “Estimates Of Federal Tax Expenditures For Fiscal Years 2014-2018,” available at <https://www.jct.gov/publications.html?func=startdown&id=4664>, accessed February 28, 2015.

<sup>444</sup> *FFRF, Inc. v. Geithner*, No. 11-CV-626 (W.D. Wis. 2011), document #44 at page 17. See also *Kaufman v. McCaughtry*, 419 F.3d (7th Cir. 2005), at 681-682.

<sup>445</sup> *Ibid.*, at 19.



they applied for it, the attorneys wanted to show that FFRF would need to do so in order to prove actual injury. If successful, they would have placed FFRF in a paradoxical bind. The group would need to request the allowance as a religious organization in order to pursue its lawsuit, even though doing so is antithetical to its core ideal: freedom from religion. If federal attorneys are correct in their assessment—and the other two lawsuits examined in this chapter demonstrate that they likely are—then FFRF’s understanding of religion and the secular differs fundamentally from that of the law, and arguably, the IRS. Whereas for FFRF, its stance toward theism and religion go hand-in-hand, and atheism forecloses the possibility of being religious, the courts can rely on precedent to demonstrate the existence of nontheistic religions, including atheism. FFRF believes it cannot be religious and be secular; the courts can rely on precedent to disagree.<sup>446</sup>

Ultimately, Judge Barbara Crabb, the judge in the case, ruled that FFRF did not have to attempt to file in order to prove standing, and she stated explicitly that she found the federal attorneys’ arguments that Gaylor and Barker could qualify as “ministers of the gospel” “difficult to take... seriously.”<sup>447</sup> Judge Crabb spends several pages rebutting their argument in her opinion, and as she rightly observes, “Defendants point to no regulations or decisions suggesting that a person who did not subscribe to any faith could qualify for an exemption under § 107(2).”<sup>448</sup> Yet this failure on the part of federal attorneys is not for lack

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<sup>446</sup> For a sound analysis of atheism as a religion in the framework of American law, see Derek H. Davis, “Is Atheism a Religion? Recent Judicial Perspectives on the Constitutional Meaning of ‘Religion,’” *Journal of Church and State* 47:4 (2005): 707-723. Davis concludes that the current precedent is ambiguous and urges the Supreme Court to provide clarity by hearing a germane lawsuit.

<sup>447</sup> *FFRF v. Geithner*, at page 8.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

of precedent. As will become clear in later sections, nonbeliever organizations can rely on a number of cases to define themselves as religious organizations, and Judge Crabb's wording is careful not to disavow that such precedent exists. She builds her argument in favor of FFRF's pure secularity in other ways, observing that "the purpose of the group is not to 'practice' atheism," but rather, "to advocate and educate."<sup>449</sup> In making this argument, she relies implicitly on the Supreme Court's logic in *Abington v. Schempp*, which drew a distinction between the teaching "of" religion and teaching "about" it, to paraphrase Jonathan Z. Smith.<sup>450</sup> Advocacy and education are "practices" in a broad, vernacular sense, but they are not religious "practice" because they are a degree removed.

Deciding in favor of FFRF, Judge Crabb ruled that the exemption did not serve an "overarching secular purpose," so it unfairly privileged religious organizations and their ministers.<sup>451</sup> She also pointed out that some religions do not have ministers and are governed by the laity in what she called a "congregational" model.<sup>452</sup> By this logic, the exemption privileges certain kinds of religion over others, even though the 1954 revision was supposedly intended to equalize treatment of clergy. In order to rebut federal attorneys on their own terms, Judge Crabb entertains a capacious definition of religion that could include atheists, but she then reasserts that an exclusively religious benefit cannot but disadvantage those who are secular. In other words, even if Gaylor and Barker were able to receive the exemption as religious atheists, the benefit would nonetheless "advance

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<sup>449</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>450</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *On Teaching Religion*, ed. Christopher I. Lehrich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 45. Smith discusses the impact of *Abington* on the study of religion in several of the volume's essays.

<sup>451</sup> *Ibid.*, 35-36.

<sup>452</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

religion over secular interests... because secular taxpayers still would be excluded.”<sup>453</sup>

According to the working definitions of secular and religious advocated by federal attorneys, only the religiously indifferent are truly secular. Gaylor and Barker’s attempt to purify themselves of the religious *makes* them religious. Like those discussed in chapter one who find organized nonbelief to be a contradiction in terms, federal attorneys adopted an exceedingly narrow understanding of the secular that considers even organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation to be religious. Judge Crabb upheld FFRF’s secularity in the face of a challenge to its purity.

Her decision was overturned on appeal in November of 2014. A 3-judge panel of the 7<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that FFRF did not have standing so long as it did not actually apply for the exemption, thus avoiding a ruling on the its constitutionality. The court summarized its position tersely:

A person suffers no judicially cognizable injury merely because others receive a tax benefit that is conditioned on allegedly unconstitutional criteria, even if that person is otherwise “similarly situated” to those who do receive the benefit. Only a person that has been denied such a benefit can be deemed to have suffered a cognizable injury. The plaintiffs here have never been denied the parsonage exemption because they have never requested it; therefore, they have suffered no injury.<sup>454</sup>

Unlike Judge Crabb, the 7<sup>th</sup> Circuit avoided deciding whether FFRF is religious, whether its co-directors are ministers of the gospel, and whether the exemption serves an overarching secular purpose. They ruled solely on FFRF’s lack of standing on account of its lack of injury, though in doing so, they put FFRF in a bind. If the organization wants to continue to pursue its lawsuit, it must apply for the exemption and challenge the IRS to deem it secular,

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<sup>453</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>454</sup> *Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc. v. Lew* 773 F.3d 815 (7<sup>th</sup> Cir. 2014), 16.

but not religious. This is not likely an ontological risk that the group is willing to take.

### **Secular Purity as a Doctrine of Faith**

In late 2012, when visiting FFRF's offices in Madison, I spoke with an attorney named Phillip about some recent lawsuits I had been following. It was an informal conversation in which he was kind enough to answer quite a few of my questions about legal precedent and the various strategies that organizations employ. When I asked Phillip why some groups frame themselves as religious in their lawsuits and others avoid it, he made an important point, which is worth quoting at length:

The law will assume that nonbelievers are a religion for certain inquiries and not for others, and it's completely unresolved which go for which. There's no rhyme or reason to it yet. It obviously puts us in a strange position because you have more power arguing before a court that you're a religion in some respects, whereas really we're not. That's one of our main things. We are not a religion! It's a doctrine of our faith.

Phillip is describing FFRF's ontological challenge, and his sarcasm at the end captures the paradoxes in which the group becomes entangled when framed by understandings of the secular and the religious that it does not share. Because the state has a tendency to recognize certain kinds of voluntary associations as religious, and because there are clear benefits in pursuing religious exemptions from taxation and certain proscriptions, it is difficult for FFRF to be secular, but not religious. FFRF is fighting an uphill battle to combat the specialness of religion and make the state indifferent to the difference between religious and secular, but in doing so, it risks compromising its secular purity.

## 2. Secular and Religious: The American Humanist Association

Phillip's remark makes it clear that nonbeliever organizations do not have to agree with FFRF's legal strategy. If they would rather, they can agree with the federal attorneys in *Lew* who argued that FFRF could be considered a religious organization for the purposes of taxation. As of the completion of my fieldwork in early 2013, there was no coordinated legal strategy across nonbeliever organizations. Because most organizations rely on attorneys provided by the American Civil Liberties Union or independent attorneys willing to challenge specific local laws, a coherent national legal strategy would be logistically difficult to achieve. A lawyer at one of the largest nonbeliever organizations in the country explained to me that there is very little inter-organizational communication regarding lawsuits: "We don't have any sort of formal collaboration. It would be great if once a month we had a conference call to talk about our strategy. I'm sure there are folks on the Right who think there's some secret cabal of lawyers, but there isn't. It's not that organized!"

Though logistics certainly pose a challenge to strategizing across organizations, the remainder of this chapter demonstrates that the most formidable barrier to strategic unity remains the ongoing disagreements among the major organizations over how to be secular. In this section and the one that follows, I examine recent lawsuits that reflect two very different strategies adopted by two of the organizations discussed at length in the previous chapter. The first embraces religion in a way that FFRF would find anathema, and the second pursues a middle ground, attempting to purify its secularity by analogy.

### ***Doe v. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District***

Founded in 1941, the American Humanist Association (AHA) grew out of the religious humanist movement that developed within the Unitarian Church in the first third of the twentieth century. Alongside independent Ethical Societies and Societies for Humanistic Judaism, AHA became a home for many of America's self-avowed humanists in the decades following WWII. In late 2010, AHA and several Jane and John Doe plaintiffs filed a lawsuit challenging the statute that requires daily recitation of the pledge of Allegiance in Massachusetts public schools. The suit alleged that requiring teachers to lead students in daily recitation discriminates against the three plaintiffs who are children attending public schools in Massachusetts and who identify as religious, atheistic humanists. The lawsuit specifically targeted the "under God" language added to the pledge in 1954.

A lawsuit won by Jehovah's Witnesses in 1943<sup>455</sup> made recitation of the pledge voluntary; students can omit the words "under God" or refuse to recite the pledge altogether. Nonetheless, plaintiffs argued that daily recitation "marginalizes [their] children and [their] family and reinforces [a] general public prejudice against atheists and Humanists, as it necessarily classifies [them] as outsiders, defines [them] as second-class citizens, and even suggests that [they are] unpatriotic."<sup>456</sup> In asserting this general prejudice, the plaintiffs cited a study conducted by sociologists at the University of

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<sup>455</sup> *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette*, 319 U.S. 624 (1943).

<sup>456</sup> This citation is from a terse summary of the plaintiffs' position in the opinion of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court: *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District*, 468 Mass. 64, at 69 (2014).

Minnesota that found that atheists are the least trusted group in the United States.<sup>457</sup> The plaintiffs in the case also “claimed that ‘[i]t is inappropriate for [their] children to have to draw attention to themselves by not participating, possibly leading to unwanted attention, criticism and potential bullying’ and that at their children’s ages, ‘fitting in’ is an important psychological need.”<sup>458</sup> The injuries claimed by the plaintiffs were general and hypothetical more than direct and manifestly experienced—a distinction on which the case’s outcome eventually rested.

Unlike FFRF, AHA adopted a legal strategy in which it defined itself as a nontheistic religious organization that avers a creed. Attorneys in the case sought to take advantage of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) to the Massachusetts Constitution, which states in part, “Equality under the law shall not be denied or abridged because of sex, race, color, creed or national origin.”<sup>459</sup> By affirming that the group is a religious organization with a creed, AHA hoped it would receive “strict scrutiny” as a “suspect” class in the evaluation of its claim, which would place the burden on the government to show that it has a compelling interest in upholding the law. In this case, AHA wanted the courts to recognize its members as part of a religious minority, which is, historically, a classification recognized by the ERA as likely to be subject to discrimination. Receiving this recognition would require the government to prove that it has a compelling interest in requiring teachers to lead daily recitation of a

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<sup>457</sup> Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, “Atheists as ‘Other’: Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society,” *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211-234. Cited in the plaintiffs/appellants brief submitted to the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts on appeal: Brief of Plaintiffs/Appellants, *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District*, No. SJC-11317, at 9 (Mass. Nov. 12, 2012).

<sup>458</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>459</sup> Mass. Const., article 106.

version of the pledge that includes “under God,” assuming, *arguendo*, that this language discriminates against religious minorities that do not affirm said God’s existence.

Given this dissertation’s larger aim of tracing the construction of the secular, the religious, and their boundary, the arguments that AHA used to establish itself as a religion are fascinating and worth quoting at length:

[The plaintiffs] hold and affirm religious views that are Humanist. [...] Whereas atheism is a religious view that essentially addresses only the specific issue of the existence of a deity, Humanism is a broader religious view that includes an affirmative naturalistic outlook; an acceptance of reason, rational analysis, logic, and empiricism as the primary means of attaining truth; an affirmative recognition of ethical duties; and a strong commitment to human rights. Humanism, while not aggressively evangelical, encourages a willingness in its adherents to be open about one’s Humanism, including the non-theistic aspect of it.<sup>460</sup>

This definition accepts atheism as a “religious view,” and it crafts a capacious understanding of capital-H *Humanism*, which includes the “religious” label, as well as a “naturalistic outlook,” reason,” “logic,” and “empiricism.” Perhaps most surprising, it also includes a “non-aggressive” form of evangelicalism—an inclusion that will appear less strange when put in the context of recent efforts by AHA and other organizations to fashion a secular identity.

While the first definition focuses primarily on categories of “belief,” and to a degree, “practice,” in a footnote that follows shortly after, AHA offers a functionalist understanding of itself as religious:

Humanism also has formal religious structure, with clergy (usually known as “celebrants” who perform weddings, funerals, counseling, and other functions commonly performed by clergy), chaplains (including a full-time Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University), and with formal entities dedicated to the practice of

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<sup>460</sup> These quotations are from the plaintiffs/appellants brief cited above, at 5 (Mass. Nov. 12, 2012).



religious Humanism, such as the American Ethical Union and the Society for Humanistic Judaism, among others. Humanism also has a strong history and continuing tradition within the Unitarian Church.<sup>461</sup>

AHA presents itself and its humanism as structurally and functionally equivalent to religion, and in particular, Christianity. Though AHA did not do so, it could have also relied on a number of cases as precedent in establishing itself as a religion, one of which—*Torcaso v. Watkins*—I discuss below in connection with the third and final lawsuit I examine in this chapter.<sup>462</sup>

AHA lost in trial court, though not because the judge was unconvinced of the group's religiosity. To the contrary, Judge S. Jane Haggerty ruled that AHA is *religious*, and the pledge is *secular*. She cited *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow* to argue that the pledge "is not a prayer and its recitation is not a religious exercise' but rather 'a patriotic exercise.'"<sup>463</sup> The addition of the "under God" phrase "does not convert its recitation from a patriotic exercise into a 'formal religious exercise,'"<sup>464</sup> and by extension, the pledge is secular regardless of that phrase's inclusion. Though Judge Haggerty accepts that AHA's humanist members comprise a religious minority, a patriotic exercise like the pledge is secular in the sense of "neutral" and thus not discriminatory.

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<sup>461</sup> *Ibid.*, at footnote 4.

<sup>462</sup> *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961). See also *Fellowship of Humanity v. County of Alameda*, 153 Cal.App.2d 673, 315 P.2d 394 (1957) and *Washington Ethical Society v. District of Columbia*, 101 U.S. App. D.C. 371 (1957). In *Kalka v. Hawk* the court ruled that the religiosity of humanism is such "a complex and novel question" that prison officials were justified in denying chapel space to a prisoner who wanted to start a chapter of AHA. See *Kalka v. Hawk*, 215 F.3d 90, at 99 (2000).

<sup>463</sup> *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow*, F.3d 597 at 1038 (9th Cir. 2002). Cited in *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District*, 8 N.E.3d 737 at 19-20 (2012).

<sup>464</sup> Cited at *ibid.*, 19. See *Freedom from Religion Foundation v. Hanover School District*, 626 F.3d 1 at 13 (2010).

AHA successfully appealed the lawsuit to the Supreme Judicial Court (SJC) of Massachusetts, which also decided against the group, though giving different reasons. The SJC ruled that AHA failed to demonstrate any actual injury caused by the pledge and emphasized that its recitation is voluntary.<sup>465</sup> In her concurring opinion, Judge Barbara A. Lenk disagreed with the lower court judge's view that the pledge is secular-neutral, observing that it "distinguishes between those who believe such a being exists and those whose beliefs are otherwise. This distinction creates a classification, one that is based on religion."<sup>466</sup> She then states explicitly that the decision of her court "should not be construed to bar other claims that might rely on sufficient indicia of harm," and "[s]hould future plaintiffs demonstrate that the distinction created by the pledge as currently written has engendered bullying or differential treatment," she states that she "would leave open the possibility that the equal rights amendment might provide a remedy."<sup>467</sup> Though AHA lost its suit, it established clearly in the state of Massachusetts that it is a religious group and its members would be protected as a religious minority. It would likely receive strict scrutiny as a suspect class if it were able to prove actual injury resulting from discrimination.

### **A Secular Religious Minority**

AHA's lawsuit is interesting for a number of reasons when considered in the wider context of the organization and its position in the secular activist movement in the United

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<sup>465</sup> *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District*, 468 Mass. 64, at 72 (2014).

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, at 84.

<sup>467</sup> *Ibid.*, at 84-85.

States. In the early 2000s, under new and younger leadership, AHA began describing itself and its members differently, moving away from the “religious” label and embracing the language of atheism. Leaders at AHA told me that they relied on membership surveys and anecdotal evidence to conclude that describing their humanism as “religious” made less and less sense for their members and their strategic vision. According to an AHA leader named Michael, around 2 or 3% of the group’s membership identifies as religious humanists, which is roughly the same proportion that identifies as Republican. Explaining AHA’s rapid growth that began around 2004, Michael framed the group’s turn away from religion and toward atheism as part of a larger national trend:

We were tapping into an environment in which George W. Bush was president, and the Christian Right was everywhere, and people were coming out of the closet as atheists saying, “Gosh, I just can’t stay in the closet anymore while this is going on.” And the fact that people were coming out of the closet, and some of them were doing so publicly, helped others who were a little less activist-oriented, but still interested, realize, “Gosh, I’m an atheist, and I’m going to say so.” And suddenly the numbers all across the map started to change. People said, “Oh, this is me.” The books that came out with Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins: Dawkins had been writing for years, but there was this swell that was happening, so Dawkins’ book [*The God Delusion*] suddenly became popular even though his work wasn’t quite that popular in the past. It’s sort of an exponential growth curve that was happening, with each thing building on the other thing.

In Michael’s view, AHA distanced itself from atheism because the group’s membership and the wider public were also doing so. Religion was becoming less popular, and atheism was becoming an identity.

In 2007, as part of its shift in focus, AHA changed its tax code status from a religious 501(c)3 nonprofit to an educational organization.<sup>468</sup> As mentioned in chapter two, AHA

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<sup>468</sup> Roy Speckhardt, “The Humanist Tax Exemption,” *Humanist Network News*, February 7, 2007, available at

was founded in 1941 as a secular nonprofit, but in 1968, it changed its tax status to that of a religious organization in order to be able to ordain clergy who could solemnize weddings throughout the United States.<sup>469</sup> The change created more burdens for the group and came with only symbolic benefits because religious 501(c)3 organizations do not need to file Form 990, a financial disclosure form. The group's new tax status not only forced it to change how it certifies its humanist celebrants, but it also required it to spend more money on accounting and tax filings and to bear the responsibility of making its finances public.

In recent years, both American Atheists (AA) and FFRF have filed lawsuits that challenge the sections of the U.S. Code that make "churches" and other religious organizations exempt from filing Form 990.<sup>470</sup> Responding directly to the 7<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals' decision in *FFRF v. Lew*, a federal court in Kentucky dismissed AA's lawsuit in May of 2014, arguing that like FFRF, AA would have to attempt to file for the exemption as a religious organization and be rejected in order to prove "injury-in-fact" and have standing for its claim.<sup>471</sup> AA's core values are similar to those of FFRF, and it is unlikely the organization will expose itself to the risk of state-sanctioned religious pollution. FFRF filed its own lawsuit challenging the religious exemption from Form 990 in a federal court in

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<http://www.americanhumanist.org/hnn/archives/?id=283%20&article=1>, accessed March 12, 2014.

<sup>469</sup> "Having It Both Ways," unattributed article, *Free Inquiry* 22:4 (Fall 2002), 40.

<sup>470</sup> See 26 U.S.C. Section 508(c)(1), available at <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/26/508>. The language in the code is that of "churches," specifically.

<sup>471</sup> *American Atheists v. Shulman*, Memorandum Order and Opinion, Civil Action No. 2012-264, E.D. Ky. (May 19, 2014).

North Carolina in December of 2012.<sup>472</sup> The suit is consistent with FFRF’s other challenges to the “specialness” of religion, and the group emphasized repeatedly in its complaint that it opposes on constitutional grounds the preferential treatment that churches and other religious groups receive from the IRS. In response to the lawsuit, the IRS has filed a motion to dismiss and a motion for summary judgment, and both sides currently await the court’s decision on the latter.<sup>473</sup>

By foregoing its religious tax status, AHA has sacrificed clear benefits in order to remain consistent with its public rhetorical turn to the language of atheism. Despite these sacrifices, the group’s leaders have also benefited from this turn and from their embrace of the so-called “New Atheism.” Participating in this larger trend, they have experienced unprecedented growth in their membership and donations, and in turn, their staff and budgets. On the surface, this larger context makes it all the more strange that AHA would adopt a strategy in its recent lawsuits that identifies the organization as a religious group and its members as a religious minority. Yet Michael’s quote above offers clues as to why AHA would pursue such a strategy despite its move away from religion.

AHA and many other groups have begun organizing to encourage nonbelievers to “come out” and openly embrace atheist, humanist, secular, and other nontheistic identities. For instance, every major nonbeliever organization in the United States joined the Openly

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<sup>472</sup> *FFRF v. Miller*, Complaint, Case No. 12-CV-946, W.D. Wis. (December 27, 2012). In its most recent reply, the IRS argued that the exemption passes the *Lemon* test, a set of three criteria developed by the Supreme Court in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* in 1971 in order to assess government violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. See *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 403 U.S. 602 (1971).

<sup>473</sup> For updates on the case, see FFRF’s well-maintained webpage concerning all of its ongoing lawsuits: <http://ffrf.org/legal/challenges/ongoing-lawsuits>.

Secular Coalition within a few months of its founding in May of 2014.<sup>474</sup> Secular activists have self-consciously modeled their “out of the closet” strategy on the gay rights movement, and lawyers for the major nonbeliever organizations have also looked to gay rights activists for new legal strategies. The lawyer who filed and argued AHA’s case in *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough* was David Niose, the organization’s former president and the current president of the Secular Coalition for America, a lobbying group of which AHA is a member.

Niose found inspiration for his use of the Massachusetts Equal Rights Amendment in *Goodridge v. Department of Health*, the 2003 decision that relied on the ERA to make Massachusetts the first state to legalize gay marriage.<sup>475</sup> Niose outlines his strategy and the debt it owes to the gay rights movement in his 2012 book, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans*.<sup>476</sup> The thrust of the book is that nonbelievers should “come out” as “secular” in order to combat the Religious Right, even referring to nonbelievers *en masse* as capital-S *Seculars*.<sup>477</sup> For Niose, Seculars are a minority facing discrimination, and they need to consciously embrace contemporary identitarian politics and make their “Secular” identity primary. Despite the awkwardness of the appellation, accepting themselves as a religious minority provides a political and legal framework that will enable them to receive

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<sup>474</sup> Kimberly Winston, “New ‘Openly Secular’ group seeks to combat anti-atheist discrimination,” *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2014, available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/new-openly-secular-group-seeks-to-combat-anti-atheist-discrimination/2014/05/02/b8195ba8-d231-11e3-a714-be7e7f142085\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/new-openly-secular-group-seeks-to-combat-anti-atheist-discrimination/2014/05/02/b8195ba8-d231-11e3-a714-be7e7f142085_story.html), accessed March 12, 2014.

<sup>475</sup> *Goodridge v. Department of Public Health*, 798 N.E.2d 941 (Mass. 2003).

<sup>476</sup> David Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 197-202.

<sup>477</sup> Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation*, 89-92, 127-29. See also, “The Out Campaign,” Richard Dawkins, available at <http://outcampaign.org/RichardDawkinsIntroduction>, accessed October 19, 2012, .

protection from the law and recognition alongside other religious minorities.

Niose’s legal strategy is more than just a way for him to extend his identity-based activism to the law. It also responds to an ongoing problem faced by nonbelievers filing First Amendment lawsuits: legal standing. In 1967, the Supreme Court’s decision in *Flast v. Cohen* created a special allowance for taxpayer standing in cases involving the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.<sup>478</sup> The Court had restricted taxpayer standing in 1923 in *Frothingham v. Mellon* such that a taxpayer could only sue the Federal Government over a law that imposed a particular harm on that individual, as opposed to a law to which the individual merely objected.<sup>479</sup> *Flast* created an exception to *Frothingham* by allowing any taxpayer to object to how legislators spend tax dollars to which she contributes so long as that objection concerns a violation of the Establishment Clause. *Flast* enabled a wide range of lawsuits concerning violations of the separation of church and state, and it has long been crucial to the legal strategies of groups like AA, FFRF, and AHA.<sup>480</sup>

In its 2007 decision in *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation, Inc.*, the Supreme Court ruled against FFRF’s taxpayer challenge that the Federal Government had acted unconstitutionally when funding regional conferences to promote the Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives.<sup>481</sup> In the process, the Court greatly restricted the *Flast* exception, making it much harder for plaintiffs to get standing to file lawsuits that rely on

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<sup>478</sup> *Flast v. Cohen*, 392 U.S. 83 (1968).

<sup>479</sup> *Frothingham v. Mellon*, 262 U.S. 447 (1923).

<sup>480</sup> For a clearly written introduction to taxpayer standing as it relates to the Establishment Clause, see Cynthia Brougher, “Legal Standing Under the First Amendment’s Establishment Clause,” *U.S. Congressional Research Service* (R40825; September 15, 2009).

<sup>481</sup> *Hein v. Freedom From Religion Foundation*, 551 U.S. 587 (2007).

the Establishment Clause.<sup>482</sup> All of the attorneys I interviewed and several other activists mentioned *Hein* as a turning point for nonbeliever organizations pursuing lawsuits that promote the separation of church and state or defend the rights of nonbelievers. According to Phillip, the FFRF attorney quoted above, “It kind of came out of the blue. No one was really expecting it.” An attorney involved with creating AHA’s legal strategy in *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough* agreed: “The *Hein* case might have been a mistake in hindsight because it created a bad standing precedent that didn’t exist before. Not many people saw that bad precedent coming.” That same AHA attorney then told me how *Hein* makes it all the more necessary and important for AHA to pursue a new legal strategy like the one in *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough*.

AHA’s new strategy tests an uncharted path for religious freedom violations by relying on the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Federal Constitution or state-level equivalents like the Massachusetts Equal Rights Amendment. Though restriction of the *Flast* exemption has made it increasingly difficult to get standing through the Establishment Clause, the Equal Protection Clause might prove as viable for secular activists as it has for advocates of gay rights. Judge Lenk made it clear during oral arguments that she understood the novelty of Niose’s strategy,<sup>483</sup> and her concurring opinion in *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough* intentionally left a path for future lawsuits relying on the Massachusetts ERA. For nonbelievers to take advantage of this new path, they must be

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<sup>482</sup> For an analysis of *Hein*’s effects, see Ira C. Lupu and Robert W. Tuttle, “Ball on a Needle: *Hein v. Freedom from Religion Foundation, Inc.* and the Future of Establishment Clause Adjudication” *Brigham Young University Law Review* (2008): 115-168.

<sup>483</sup> For a video of the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court’s hearing of oral arguments in *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough*, see [http://www2.suffolk.edu/sjc/archive/2013/SJC\\_11317.html](http://www2.suffolk.edu/sjc/archive/2013/SJC_11317.html).



recognizable to the courts as a religious minority or at very least an analogue to one. Judge Lenk also made it clear that future successful lawsuits must demonstrate actual injury rather than a vague sense of discrimination or hypothetical bullying.

As president of AHA and the Secular Coalition and as author of *Nonbeliever Nation*, Niose is laying the groundwork for his legal strategy's long-term efficacy while simultaneously establishing a political bloc that he imagines can contend with the Religious Right. By seeking protections from the "under God" language in the Pledge of Allegiance as a religious minority, AHA's strategy confronts the specialness of religion without attacking it head on. Unlike FFRF, which aims to revise the law such that it recognizes no distinction between secular and religious, AHA undermines the law's ability to distinguish between secular and religious by making itself *both* and by demanding that the law's working definition of religion be capacious enough to contain it. Because AHA's institutional history affords it the ability to imagine itself as a secular/religious hybrid without compromising its core founding values, AHA does not face the ontological challenge of being secular, but not religious.

### **3. Like Religion, but Secular: The Center for Inquiry**

Most humanists whom I met and interviewed do not consider themselves religious, and many explicitly described themselves as *secular* humanists. Those who understand the secular to exclude religion sometimes go to great lengths to avoid religious pollution. For instance, when I attended a secular humanist conference at the headquarters of the Center for Inquiry (CFI), just outside of Buffalo, New York, I learned the importance of purifying

one's speech of religious idioms. While listening to a roundtable of student leaders, a man seated a few feet to my left sneezed, and out of habit, I muttered, "Bless you." Giving me a sideways glance, he laughed at me and shook his head. I knew immediately that I had just revealed myself to be insufficiently secular.

The next morning, my suspicions were confirmed while getting a ride from my motel to the conference site down the road. A woman sitting in the backseat next to me sneezed, and imagining myself a veteran secular humanist, I remained silent. When both the driver and the passenger in the front seat responded with "Gesundheit," I made a mental note of their cleverness. A moment later, a man who was also sitting in the backseat asked everyone in the car what "Gesundheit" means. He told us he was worried that the term bore religious connotations in German, and he did not want to proliferate religious pollution unconsciously. His question voiced concern not only about his own purity, but also that of the two people riding in the front seat. Translation, it seems, is not an act of purification. When the others and I assured him that the term comes from the German word for "health," he was visibly relieved. Trying to be helpful, I offered "salud" as a Spanish alternative. Though I did not tell my fellow passengers, "salud" is a term that my mother used often when I was growing up. She is a Jehovah's Witness and a fluent Spanish-speaker, and using the Spanish word for "health" allowed her to avoid the phrase "bless you" and its supposedly pagan assumptions.

For many of the organized nonbelievers I met who identify as secular humanists,

this kind of careful boundary work is crucial.<sup>484</sup> Unlike many members of FFRF and AA—some of whom will attend the groups' annual conferences but would never join a local community—secular humanists in AHA and CFI are more likely to value and encourage communities of nonbelievers. They see their humanism as a nonreligious alternative to religion, and they hope to find in it the functional equivalents of what the religious find in their congregations and other community structures. A local secular humanist leader named Jeanie, whom I met at a national conference, explained to those of us attending a workshop how important it is to consider the big-picture needs of local group members: "I feel like there are life-cycle issues where people drop out of the movement. People start dropping out after college and after they start having children and families. If you want women to come to your discussion groups, you have to have child care." Jeanie understands herself as occupying a pastoral role as a local group leader, though she thinks local leaders need to do more to care for their group members: "We're growing toward that time when we can become a legitimate alternative to religious institutions. We are not yet a legitimate alternative. We just are not. This is what we need to become." For Jeanie and many other organized secular humanists, the goal is to create structures that are *like* those of religious groups, but which are not actually *religious*.

For the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH) and CFI, the challenge of being *like* religion, but *secular* is foundational. Paul Kurtz created CSH in 1980, in the wake of his departure from AHA in 1978. Partly to justify his break with AHA, and partly as a way to

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<sup>484</sup> On the careful boundary work of Jehovah's Witnesses, see Joseph Blankholm, "No Part of the World: How Jehovah's Witnesses Perform the Boundaries of Their Community," *ARC* 37 (2009): 197-211.

bring many of that group's members and donors with him, Kurtz constructed his groups to be avowedly *secular*, consciously parting from the religious tradition of the humanist movement, capitalizing on growing fervor among conservative Christians over the bugaboo of secular humanism, and providing an expressly nonreligious secular alternative to religion. In the sections that follow, I revisit the narrative of secular humanism's institutional founding that I began in the previous chapter, attending closely to the importance of a number of legal decisions in both its creation and demonization. I then rely on that history to explain a recent lawsuit won by CFI, which successfully argued that though the organization is not religious, the law should treat it like a religious group for the purposes of ordaining clergy who can solemnize weddings in the state of Indiana.

### **The Religion of Secular Humanism**

The story of secular humanism begins in a footnote. In 1961, the Supreme Court ruled in *Torcaso v. Watkins* that language in state constitutions that requires a religious test for office violates the First Amendment of the Federal Constitution.<sup>485</sup> The suit's most immediate effect was to allow Roy Torcaso to become a notary public in the state of Maryland, despite being a nontheist and despite that state's Constitution forbidding anyone from holding office who would not declare belief in the existence of God. In its *Torcaso* decision, the Court relied on a previous case, *Everson v. Board of Education*, which had extended the notion of separation of church and state from the federal level to the states.<sup>486</sup> Eight states still have language requiring all officeholders to believe in God, though where

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<sup>485</sup> *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961).

<sup>486</sup> *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

lawsuits have challenged that language, religious tests have been overturned. As is the case in Maryland, even when overturned, the original language is allowed to remain.<sup>487</sup>

More important for the history of secular humanism is a minor footnote that appears in the majority opinion in *Torcaso*, written by Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black: “Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others.”<sup>488</sup> Though the term “secular humanism” existed in 1961, no one had used it in print as a positive self-appellation. For example, Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen mentioned it in 1940; Reinhold Niebuhr used it in a lecture in 1952, and Adlai Stevenson in a lecture in 1954.<sup>489</sup> In all these cases, “secular humanism” is a disparaging term that contrasts with Christianity or “Christian humanism.” To paraphrase historian Alan C. Kors’ assessment of the lack of atheists in early modern Europe despite the prevalence of atheism as a bugaboo of Catholic theologians, there was secular humanism prior to the 1960s, but there were no secular humanists.<sup>490</sup>

Judge Black appears to borrow the term from two amicus curiae briefs submitted to the court in support of Roy Torcaso or from a footnote in a book published by Torcaso’s

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<sup>487</sup> “Religious Tests for Public Office,” *Church/State FAQ, Freedom From Religion Foundation*, available at <http://ffrf.org/outreach/item/14017-religious-tests-for-public-office>.

<sup>488</sup> *Torcaso* at 495 n.11.

<sup>489</sup> “Failure in Religion Charged to Schools,” *New York Times*, January 8, 1952. “Sheen Calls War a Spur to Religion,” *New York Times*, February 12, 1940. “Text of Adlai Stevenson’s Address at Columbia on Nation’s ‘Moral Crisis,’” *New York Times*, June 6, 1954.

<sup>490</sup> Alan C. Kors, *Atheism in France, 1650-1729* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 81-109.

attorney, Leo Pfeffer, in 1958.<sup>491</sup> In Pfeffer's book, he offers a capacious definition of secular humanism that points to no self-identifying secular humanists: "The term 'secular humanism' is used in this book not to mean a consciously nontheistic movement, but merely the influence of those unaffiliated with organized religion and concerned with human values."<sup>492</sup> Pfeffer observes in a retrospective article on *Torcaso* that the term's provenance is difficult to trace, and he attributes its appearance in one of the amicus briefs to Joseph Blau, a professor of Religion at Columbia University who had written a legal memorandum for the American Ethical Union, which may have then circulated more widely.<sup>493</sup> Before *Torcaso*, secular humanism is mostly a foil for Christian humanism and hardly even constitutes a bugaboo; nor is it a descriptor commonly used among humanists, and certainly not in print.<sup>494</sup> After *Torcaso*, secular humanism becomes a "religion," in Black's words, "which do[es] not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God."

In the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, minor lawsuits and state legislation began putting forth the idea that "Secular Humanism" is an official or established religion in

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<sup>491</sup> Pfeffer has attempted a genealogy of the term in acknowledgment of the impact it has had in American law and culture. See Pfeffer, "How Religious Is Secular Humanism?" *The Humanist* 48:5 (September 1988): 14.

<sup>492</sup> Leo Pfeffer, *Creeds in Competition* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1958), footnote on 29.

<sup>493</sup> Pfeffer, "How Religious Is Secular Humanism?" 14.

<sup>494</sup> In a study of the term "humanism" centered on its nontheistic usage, Nicolas Walter concludes the same, though he offers little in the way temporal precision or a cause for the change: "During the 1960s and 1970s the phrase *secular humanism* was gradually adopted as the description of many American humanists; though they sometimes accepted [other descriptions]." See Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).

the United States.<sup>495</sup> In 1978, the same year that Kurtz left AHA, John W. Whitehead and John Conlan synthesized these disparate attempts in an article published in the *Texas Tech Law Review* that built on *Torcaso* in order to make “the religion of Secular Humanism” a full-blown bugaboo for the nascent Religious Right.<sup>496</sup> According to Whitehead and Conlan, “The Supreme Court has adopted a concept of religion which is tantamount to Secular Humanism's position of the centrality of man, because the basis of both is the deification of man's reason.”<sup>497</sup> They argued that secular humanism had superseded Protestantism as the *de facto* established religion in the United States, and it was time for America to return to its Christian roots.

Two years later, in 1980, Tim LaHaye published *The Battle for the Mind*, in which he built on evangelical theologian Francis A. Schaeffer's criticisms of “humanism” and argued that secular humanism had nearly been destroyed with the fall of the Roman Empire, but was preserved by the transmission of Aristotle through St. Thomas Aquinas.<sup>498</sup> In its grand scale and tidy line of transmission from the Greeks through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, LaHaye's outline of the humanist tradition resembles the more inclusive framings sketched by avowed humanists like Charles Francis Potter and A.C. Grayling. LaHaye also quotes from the first and second humanist manifestoes and marshals the

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<sup>495</sup> For more on the construction of the secular humanism bugaboo by the Religious Right in the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, see Christopher P. Toumey, “Evolution and Secular Humanism,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 61:2 (Summer 1993): 275-301.

<sup>496</sup> John W. Whitehead and John Conlan, “The Establishment of the Religion of Secular Humanism and Its First Amendment Implications,” *Texas Tech Law Review* 10:1 (1978): 1-66.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>498</sup> Tim LaHaye, *The Battle for the Mind* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1979), 27-30. See also Francis A. Schaeffer, *How Should We Then Live?* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1976).

writings of avowedly religious humanist philosopher Corliss Lamont in order to demonstrate that he, too, understood the *Torcaso* decision as describing a “religion” of “Secular Humanism.”<sup>499</sup> *The Battle for the Mind* sold well, and it popularized the bugaboo of secular humanism among conservative Christians.<sup>500</sup> This is the context in which Kurtz founded the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980.

Building on Whitehead and Conlan, who argued that evolution is “a prominent feature of Secular Humanism,”<sup>501</sup> in 1987 Judge W. Brevard Hand organized a class action lawsuit alleging that the religion of secular humanism was being taught in textbooks in public schools in Mobile, Alabama. An archconservative Nixon appointee in 1971, Judge Hand made a name for himself on the national stage in 1983 by ruling in favor of school prayer and arguing in his decision that the Supreme Court had misunderstood the Constitution in prohibiting states from establishing religion.<sup>502</sup> In Judge Hand’s decision in the 1987 textbook case, he refutes Kurtz’s testimony directly while affirming that secular humanism is a religion:

Dr. Kurtz’s testimony that secular humanism has no religious aspect is not logical. For purposes of the first amendment, secular humanism is a religious belief system, entitled to the protections of, and subject to the prohibitions of, the religion clauses. It is not a mere scientific methodology that may be promoted and advanced in the public schools.<sup>503</sup>

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<sup>499</sup> LaHaye, 128. See Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1977), 24. Lamont is an interlocutor for LaHaye throughout the book.

<sup>500</sup> Toumey, 281.

<sup>501</sup> Whitehead and Conlan, 44.

<sup>502</sup> Stuart Taylor, Jr., “Judge Who Banned Textbooks: Hero of the Right,” *The New York Times*, March 7, 1987, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/1987/03/07/us/judge-who-banned-textbooks-hero-of-the-right.html>, accessed, March 14, 2015. See also *Jaffree v. Wallace*, 705 F.2d 1526 (1983).

<sup>503</sup> *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 655 F. Supp. 939, S.D. Ala. (1987) at 982-3.



Though the decision banned forty-four textbooks from Mobile public schools in March of 1987, it was overturned by a three-judge panel of the 11<sup>th</sup> U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in August of the same year.<sup>504</sup> Though Judge Hand's legal maneuver failed, he succeeded in bringing still more attention to secular humanism, both as a millennia-old conspiracy and as a modest institutional reality.

Not only did Kurtz position his organizations as a break from the religious tradition of AHA, but he also set them up as an institutional and ideological bulwark against the Religious Right. If Kurtz could establish that his *secular* humanism was not a religion and his beliefs and groups were not religious, then he and his fellow secular humanists could thwart conservative Christian attempts to argue that secular humanism is an established religion in the United States. Kurtz's organizations benefited greatly from lawsuits like the textbook case in Mobile because they brought publicity and donations to the organization, and they provided the group with a clear opponent, albeit one that is far larger and more organized. In their founding, in their public face, and in their strategic vision, the Council for Secular Humanism and its umbrella organization, the Center for Inquiry, must be secular.

### ***Center for Inquiry v. Marion Circuit Court Clerk***

Though CFI is avowedly secular and not religious, it positions itself as the rightful inheritor of the humanist tradition, and it aims to provide an alternative to religious

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<sup>504</sup> Toumey, 282. *Smith v. Board of School Commissioners of Mobile County*, 827 F.2d 684 (1987).

structures and functions. These alternatives include local communities with trained group leadership, summer camps for children, life-cycle rituals like naming ceremonies and funerals, and even a secular alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous, Secular Organizations for Sobriety. Like Auguste Comte's Religion of Humanity and other secular religions, CFI purifies itself through a layer of abstraction, which in turn, enables it to relate to religion analogically, as opposed to transitively. CFI ultimately differs from secular religions in its disavowal of the very term "religion" and its careful policing of language like "bless you." This simultaneous disavowal and conscious emulation of religion can appear contradictory when viewed from other ways of understanding how the secular and the religious ought to relate.

The remainder of this chapter examines a lawsuit that CFI won in the state of Indiana, which asked the courts to consider the organization to be *like* a religious group, but not actually *religious*. Though a lower federal court saw this request as a contradiction, a federal appeals court recognized CFI as analogous to a religious group and granted its request. Like AHA, CFI allows the law to preserve the specialness of religion and asks to be included in that special class. Unlike AHA, CFI ultimately refuses to be called religious, despite receiving religious benefits.

Filed in a federal district court in Indiana in 2012, *CFI v. Marion Circuit Court* challenges the state's wedding Solemnization Statute. According to Indiana law, anyone can officiate a wedding, but only certain governmental or religious persons can solemnize a wedding by filing a copy of the marriage certificate and the marriage license with the

appropriate circuit court.<sup>505</sup> The Center for Inquiry argued that its trained secular officiants, which it calls “secular celebrants,” should also be able to solemnize weddings. Because CFI lacks religious tax status, there are some states, like Indiana, where its celebrants cannot do so. CFI’s lawsuit provided a way to get around this problem without claiming it is religious or challenging the specialness of the religion. The suit acknowledges that Indiana’s “Solemnization Statute cannot be interpreted to suggest that everyone has a First Amendment right to solemnize marriages,” so CFI needed to prove its celebrants have a special right to do so.<sup>506</sup> In short, CFI asked the Court to consider it to be *like* a religious group, but not actually *call* it religious. It asked the Court to *analogize* it for this specific purpose.

In addition to CFI, one of the plaintiffs in the case is Reba Wooden, executive director of CFI’s Indiana branch. In 2009, Wooden created CFI’s secular celebrant training program, the first of its kind for the organization, though hardly the first institution to train celebrants.<sup>507</sup> The oldest organization to do so is an adjunct of AHA called the Humanist

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<sup>505</sup> *Center for Inquiry v. Marion Circuit Court*, No. 1:12-cv-00623-SEB-DML, U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243 1, 3 (S.D. Ind. 2012). “Pursuant to the Solemnization Statute, the authority to solemnize marriage is vested in the following categories of persons or entities: (1) A member of the clergy of a religious organization (even if the cleric does not perform religious functions for an individual congregation), such as a minister of the gospel, a priest, a bishop, an archbishop, or a rabbi. (2) A judge. (3) A mayor, within the mayor’s county. (4) A clerk or a clerk-treasurer of a city or town, within a county in which the city or town is located. (5) A clerk of the circuit court. (6) The Friends Church, in accordance with the rules of the Friends Church. (7) The German Baptists, in accordance with the rules of their society. (8) The Bahai faith, in accordance with the rules of the Bahai faith. (9) The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, in accordance with the rules of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. (10) An imam of a masjid (mosque), in accordance with the rules of the religion of Islam.”

<sup>506</sup> *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 11.

<sup>507</sup> *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 7.

Society, which was originally named the Humanist Society of Friends when it was founded by nontheistic Quakers in Los Angeles in 1939.<sup>508</sup> Though AHA has changed its tax status to a secular, educational nonprofit, it allows the Humanist Society to remain a religious 501(c)3 expressly to enable its ordained celebrants to solemnize weddings in all fifty states.

Though AHA's hybrid secular/religious identity allows it to avoid the problems that CFI faced in Indiana, some of its members are unhappy about the group's nominal association with religion—even if the religious group is merely an adjunct of AHA. At AHA's national conference in New Orleans in 2012, I attended a workshop for celebrants hosted by the Humanist Society. When the leader of the workshop explained that the Society retained its religious tax status in order for its humanist celebrants to be able to solemnize weddings throughout the United States, several attendees became frustrated. In response the AHA leader simply explained, "This is the game we play." Because CFI refuses to be identified as or with a religious organization, it does not allow its celebrants to receive certification through the Humanist Society or through the more widely known Universal Life Church. For example, Reba Wooden had to relinquish the Humanist Society certification she had previously received upon taking a paid position with CFI in 2007.<sup>509</sup> CFI literally wants nothing to do with religion—not even the word.

In making the argument that CFI is not religious, but "stands on equal footing" with

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<sup>508</sup> "About the Humanist Society," *Humanist Society*, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://humanist-society.org/about/>. For more on celebrants, see Per Smith, "Spitting With the Wind," *The New Humanism*, accessed August 31, 2013, <http://thenewhumanism.org/authors/per-smith/articles/spitting-with-the-wind>.

<sup>509</sup> *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 7.

religious organizations, the group relied heavily on language from two cases: *Kaufman v. McCaughtry* and the aforementioned *Torcaso v. Watkins*.<sup>510</sup> *Kaufman* is fascinating and worth quoting:

Without venturing too far into the realm of the philosophical, we have suggested in the past that when a person sincerely holds beliefs dealing with issues of “ultimate concern” that for her occupy a “place parallel to that filled by . . . God in traditionally religious persons,” those beliefs represent her religion. We have already indicated that atheism may be considered, in this specialized sense, a religion.<sup>511</sup>

In *Torcaso*, Justice Black makes a similar argument that understands nontheistic belief as a special case of religion rather than analogous to it. CFI wanted the court to understand *Kaufman* and *Torcaso* as indicating that CFI is, in a “specialized sense,” *like* religion, as opposed to being, in a “specialized sense,” religious.

Favoring the latter interpretation, Judge Sarah Evans Barker rejected CFI’s argument. Citing *Thomas v. Review Board of Indiana Employment Security Division*, she argued that “the judicial process is singularly ill-equipped to resolve such [issues] in relation to the Religion Clauses’ and that ‘[c]ourts are not arbiters of scriptural interpretation.’”<sup>512</sup> She continued: “[W]e will not declare that CFI is a religion when it suits the group to be classified as one. Truly, CFI asks too much in making this argument. The group’s recurrent insistence that it is not a religion forecloses the analysis they have entreated the Court to make.”<sup>513</sup> Though she based her decision on other grounds, Judge

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<sup>510</sup> *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 13. *Kaufman v. McCaughtry*, 419 F.3d 678 (7th Cir. 2005). *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961).

<sup>511</sup> *Kaufman*, 419 F.3d, at 681-82. Quoted in *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 13.

<sup>512</sup> *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 14-15. *Thomas v. Review Bd. of Ind. Emp’t Sec. Div.*, 450 U.S. 707, 715-16 (1981).

<sup>513</sup> *Center for Inquiry*, 2012 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 170243, at 15.

Barker spent several pages of her opinion refuting CFI's claim that it is simultaneously *not* religious and *analogous* to a religious group.

Ultimately, Judge Barker's ruling against CFI rested on the group's attempt to treat religion as both special and not. She decided that the plaintiffs could not demonstrate actual success on the merits in either of their causes of action—and further, that their claims eviscerated each other by being in contradiction. In its first claim, CFI asked the court declare Indiana's Solemnization Statute unconstitutional, thereby making valid the weddings already solemnized by CFI's secular celebrants. In its second claim, CFI sought a permanent injunction enjoining the Solemnization Statute such that it would allow CFI's celebrants to solemnize weddings in the future. The first claim required that the statute be understood as an establishment of religion that unfairly favored the religious over the nonreligious. The second required that CFI be considered like a religion in order to merit equal protection and be afforded the special privilege of solemnizing weddings. Not only was CFI asking the court to understand it is *like* religion, but *not*, it was also asking the court to stop treating religion as special, but then continue to do so as long as it benefits CFI. Judge Barker would not allow CFI to have its cake and eat it, too. Though CFI's claim might appear consistent to members of the group and other organized nonbelievers, it is at odds with Judge Barker's understanding of the boundary between the secular and the religious, and it lies at the heart of a persistent challenge faced by judges adjudicating cases concerning nonbelievers.<sup>514</sup>

CFI appealed Judge Barker's ruling, and the 7<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in

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<sup>514</sup> For a thorough outline of these challenges, see Nelson Tebbe, "Nonbelievers," *Virginia Law Review*, 97:5 (September 2011): 1117-1118.

favor of the organization, deciding that it can be analogized to religion for the purposes of the law.<sup>515</sup> In its decision, the appeals court acknowledged as legible CFI's understanding of itself:

The Center maintains that its methods and values play the same role in its members' lives as religious methods and values play in the lives of adherents. [...] [Plaintiffs] are unwilling to pretend to be something they are not, or pretend to believe something they do not; they are shut out as long as they are sincere in following an ethical system that does not worship any god, adopt any theology, or accept a religious label.<sup>516</sup>

The court granted CFI's appeal because it considered the group secular but otherwise identical to a religious group as far as the law is concerned in this case: "An accommodation cannot treat religious groups favorably when secular groups are identical with respect to the attribute selected for that accommodation."<sup>517</sup> The court emphasized repeatedly that its understanding of neutrality requires that equivalent beliefs and groups be treated equally: nonbelievers like believers, and secular like religious. The court allowed CFI to remain like religion, but secular.

### **Conclusion: Sites of Secular Construction**

Despite its failure, FFRF's lawsuit offers a way of being secular that completely excludes the religious and understands the secular purification of government as a moral imperative. AHA's lawsuit is carefully ironic, playing deftly with legal understandings of religious and secular in ways that suit the ideological demands of its members and its

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<sup>515</sup> *Center for Inquiry, Inc. v. Marion Circuit Court Clerk*, 2014 U.S. App. LEXIS 13354 (7th Cir. Ind., July 14, 2014).

<sup>516</sup> *Ibid.*, at 3-5.

<sup>517</sup> *Ibid.*, at 5.

institutional needs as an organization. AHA's suit is also a small piece of its larger strategy of getting America's "Seculars" to "come out," both as a voting bloc and a religious minority in the evolving pantheon of American religious pluralism. CFI's lawsuit drives a wedge in more ways than one. Its first wedge continues to separate the group's secular humanism from its religious origins and from the group that Kurtz left to found it. Its second wedge separates the law from itself, offering the courts contradictory precedent and even contradictory claims, while demanding that judges reflect on these contradictions in resolving its suit.

Different groups experience the ontological challenge of being secular differently because it is only a challenge for groups that seek to free the secular from the religious by maintaining their secular purity. FFRF, AHA, and CFI all harbor some anxiety about the boundary between the secular and the religious, but they ultimately approach that challenge in different ways. FFRF's need to avoid religion in all senses leads it to pursue a legal strategy which seeks to make the law and other parts of the state indifferent to the difference between secular and religious. It wants to make everything secular by making religion no longer special. AHA faces the challenge of being secular only sometimes, when it seeks to purify itself in order to become more appealing to secular Americans confused by its porous, pre-WWII way of understanding the relationship between secular and religious. CFI attempts to split the difference through a process of analogy that borrows from social scientists, who are also the inheritors of Comte's Positive Philosophy. They have long employed the tools of abstraction and comparison in order to understand religion as an ideology, religious practice as functionally efficacious, and religious groups as voluntary



associations—the triumvirate that social scientists now call belief, behavior, and belonging.<sup>518</sup> CFI’s secular humanist ideology, its life-cycle rituals, and its humanist communities are all equivalent to those of religion—but not religious.

Chapters one and two of this dissertation presented the landscape of organized nonbelief in the United States and revealed the underlying epistemologies, semiotics, and ontologies of various ways of imagining the boundary between the secular and the religious. Inasmuch as each of the lawsuits discussed in this chapter represents a different way of imagining that boundary or lack thereof, and inasmuch as these lawsuits have consequences that extend well beyond those impacting the plaintiffs, they offer examples of where the rubber hits the road and the secular sausage gets made. In turn, they demonstrate the reciprocal relationships between nonbelievers’ assertions about the secular and the religious and those of academics and the law. Cases like *Murray v. Curlett* and *Abington v. Schempp* are major turning points in the histories of church/state jurisprudence, organized nonbelievers, and scholars of religion. They are sites in which the meanings of secular and religious are radically overdetermined, and yet they are also conclusions in which those meanings become instantiated and effect consequences. Like the three lawsuits discussed at length in this chapter, they are sites in the ongoing reconstruction of the secular and the religious.

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<sup>518</sup> See, for instance, Barry A. Kosmin, Ariela Keysar, Ryan Cragun, and Juhem Navarro-Rivera, *American Nones: The Profile of the No Religion Population* (Hartford, CT: Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture, 2009). My equation of “religion” and “belief” is an intentional nod to the overwhelmingly belief-centered, Christian history of “religion” as inherited by scholars and the wider public.

## CHAPTER 4: The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular

On October 1, 2012, the largest and most influential lobbying organization for nonbelievers, the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), held its first-ever Congressional briefing. For weeks before, SCA had issued action alerts that urged recipients to contact their Representatives and request that they attend. Because Congress had adjourned more than a week earlier, on September 22<sup>nd</sup>, most Representatives had already returned to their home districts in order to campaign for the upcoming election on November 6<sup>th</sup>. Held in a small room on the southeast corner of the Cannon House Office Building, the event featured a panel of three speakers and drew a standing-room only crowd that included staff members from more than thirty-five Congressional offices. House staffers with whom I spoke before the briefing expressed their surprise at the existence of a secular lobby and were wary of the ambiguous implications of the briefing's title: "The State of Secular America."

As the briefing progressed, it became clear that these staffers were not the only ones to notice that "secular" is "polysemous" and can mean many things. The panelists, SCA's staff, and members of the audience struggled to find a shared understanding of the secular and debated its definition throughout the briefing. Its polysemy has posed a similar challenge to scholars, who in recent years have offered a range of understandings of the secular and secularism, several of which I survey in this dissertation's introduction.<sup>519</sup>

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<sup>519</sup> See, for example, Saba Mahmood, "Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation," *Public Culture* 18:2 (2006): 323-247; Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); and John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in*

Charles Taylor has called this range “the polysemy of the secular” and argued that its seemingly descriptive uses are latently normative.<sup>520</sup> Treating SCA’s first-ever Congressional briefing as a site of secular construction, this chapter identifies four distinct ways in which secular activists frame the secular in order to advocate for nontheists and promote various understandings of secularism. As activists conflate and distinguish among these meanings of the secular, they extend the limits of its usage and enable new forms of social practice that remake what the secular is and what it can do in America today.

In analyzing interview data, fieldnotes, and data collected from textual sources I have paid close attention to language and its context in order to understand how activists rhetorically frame the secular.<sup>521</sup> By presenting meanings and usage that are not always clear to those who are not secular activists, they bring the secular out of what David A. Snow has called an “interpretive everyday frame” and into a “collective action frame.”<sup>522</sup> For example, that House staffers at SCA’s Congressional briefing were confused by the phrase, “the state of secular America,” indicates that an interpretive everyday frame was inadequate for understanding SCA’s use of the secular. Yet inasmuch as this chapter examines how secular activists consciously conflate everyday and activist framings of the secular, it demonstrates how the secular’s polysemy allows activists to double the frame, so to speak, by seeming to operate in an everyday frame while actually doing activism, or

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*Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

<sup>520</sup> Charles Taylor, “The Polysemy of the Secular,” *Social Research* 76:4 (2009): 1143-1176.

<sup>521</sup> Gwyneth I. Williams and Rhys H. Williams, “‘All We Want is Equality’: Rhetorical Framing in the Fathers’ Rights Movement,” *Images of Issues*, ed. Joel Best, 2d ed. (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995), 191–212.

<sup>522</sup> David A. Snow, “Framing Processes, Ideology, and Discursive Fields,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 384-385.

switching back and forth between the frames seamlessly. Secular activists attempt to create what Rhys H. Williams has called a “cultural resonance” by connecting their activist frames to more familiar everyday frames through the polysemy of the secular.<sup>523</sup>

Political scientist Andrew Davison takes a similar approach to sociologists who adopt the language of “framing,” though he calls it “hermeneutics” and relies on Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer to theorize how intersubjective meanings establish the structures through which various forms of secularism become possible.<sup>524</sup> In Davison’s language, this chapter offers a careful analysis of intentional efforts to intersubjectively renegotiate the secular in order to generate new possibilities for collective action. These efforts are critical to SCA’s pursuit of its two-part mission, “to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints in the United States, and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government as the best guarantee of freedom for all.”<sup>525</sup>

Connecting SCA’s House briefing with the wider aims of America’s secular activists offers a specific site—a crucible—for observing the ongoing reconstruction of the contemporary American secular.

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<sup>523</sup> Rhys H. Williams, “The Cultural Contexts of Collective Action: Constraints, Opportunities, and the Symbolic Life of Social Movements,” *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, ed. David A. Snow, Sarah A. Soule, and Hanspeter Kriesi (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004), 91-115.

<sup>524</sup> Andrew Davison, “Hermeneutics and the Politics of Secularism,” *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 25-39.

<sup>525</sup> Secular Coalition for America, “About,” 2012, available at <http://secular.org/content/government-action>, accessed February 18, 2013.

## **A Brief History of the Secular Coalition**

The Secular Coalition for America was founded in 2002 as the result of a years-long effort spearheaded by secular activist and College of Charleston Professor of Mathematics Herb Silverman. Until it hired its first paid staff in 2005, SCA relied on volunteer leadership and the behind-the-scenes political clout of a small number of DC insiders interested in secular activism. From 2005 to 2009, under the leadership of Lori Lipman Brown, SCA grew to three full-time employees and nine member organizations and increased its budget from around fifty thousand dollars to several hundred thousand. Though modest growth continued under Lipman Brown's replacement, Sean Faircloth, SCA's Board members felt that professional lobbying leadership was necessary for the organization to expand its influence. In May of 2012, after going without an Executive Director for the better part of a year and turning to the services of a headhunter to identify potential applicants, SCA hired Edwina Rogers, its first leader with significant lobbying experience. Rogers is a self-described "huge Republican" who has operated in the Republican Party for more than twenty years and who has held appointments in the offices of conservative Senators Trent Lott and Jeff Sessions. She was also General Counsel to the National Republican Senatorial Committee during the Newt Gingrich-led Republican takeover in 1994 and an economic adviser to President George W. Bush. Hiring Rogers led to the resignation of at least one prominent member of SCA's Advisory Board, though all of the other organizational leaders whom I interviewed expressed guarded approval of her appointment.

Informed that if she did not "show results" within three months of her hiring, SCA's Board would fire her, Rogers worked quickly to expand the organization and restructure its

activities to bring it into line with the practices of more prominent lobbying outfits. At present, SCA's offices are located just north of K Street, around the corner from one of its allies, Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Under Rogers' leadership, SCA began sending weekly emails with news and updates on its own efforts and those of its member organizations. It also holds national conference calls on Thursdays at noon. Because lobbying efforts depend in part on the number of potential voters a given organization can prove it can mobilize, SCA is in the process of acquiring "endorsing" and "allied" organizations that agree with its mission in whole or in part, and with which it can work to leverage its position. In May 2012, SCA had 34 endorsing organizations, and as of early April 2014 it had 166. While this change reflects rapid growth, it also indicates that SCA has affiliated with only a small fraction of the more than 1,400 local nonbeliever organizations in the United States.

Today, SCA engages in a range of lobbying practices and outreach efforts intended to advocate for nonbelievers and catalyze secular activists. In addition to organizing state chapters and holding weekly conference calls, SCA regularly meets with Congressional and White House staff regarding legislation and policies of concern to its members. It also maintains a voting guide and Congressional report card for secular voters, mobilizes its members and member organizations to contact their Senators and Representatives regarding upcoming legislative votes, and lends support to the efforts of partner organizations on issues like science education and international advocacy for nonbelievers. In an effort to improve its secular activism at the grassroots, SCA now organizes lobbying training workshops, State and National Lobbying Days, and a Secular Summit, held annually

in Washington DC. A leader at a prominent humanist organization reflected that SCA's most important contribution might be the communication and partnership it has encouraged among the leaders of its member organizations. "The leaders know each other," he told me, "and they don't always consult with each other about every piece of activism. But at least there's some conversation."

### **The Polysemous Secular**

Panelists, SCA staff, and audience members at the House briefing represented varying interests as they discussed and argued for particular ways of framing the secular. Some of their framings were consonant and even mutually constitutive, and others were in tension. The next section of this paper connects the actual statements of those who spoke at the House briefing with the wider efforts of secular activists. In so doing, each subsection will outline one of four distinct meanings of the secular: 1) secularism as the separation of church and state; 2) the secular public sphere 3) secularism as the ideology of unbelief; and 4) secular identity.

#### **1. The Secular Character of American Government: Secularism as the Separation of Church and State**

The briefing's first panelist, Ira C. Lupu, Professor Emeritus of Law at George Washington University, began by observing that SCA's materials reflect "quite a complex set of beliefs." Lupu is an expert on constitutional law who has written on the religion clauses of the First Amendment and is a Senior Fellow at the Emory University Center for

Law and Religion.<sup>526</sup> Wanting to disentangle the multiple ways in which he saw SCA framing the secular, he drew a distinction between “atheism” and “secularism,” where the former is privately held secular belief, and the latter is belief in the need for a secular government. While Lupu recognized that SCA might not want to make a potentially divisive distinction between these two senses of the secular, he decided in preparing his remarks that doing so is important from a legal perspective and worth emphasizing in the context of the briefing.

In order to ground his discussion of secularism, Lupu cited the text of the first two clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Remarking that these “sixteen words are not self-defining or self-explanatory,” he added that much of “what we think about them has come primarily from Supreme Court interpretation over the last seventy-five years.” While Lupu’s ballpark figure is about a decade off in strict terms of legal history, he is right to point to the 1940s as a time of great change in the relationship between the US Constitution and American understandings of the separation of church and state. It was not until 1947 with *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, that the Supreme Court began to interpret the Constitution as guaranteeing the separation of church and state and applying that interpretation to the states.<sup>527</sup> In his majority decision in *Everson*, Justice Hugo Black made an explicit connection between the Constitution and language used by Thomas Jefferson in an 1802

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<sup>526</sup> See, for example, Ira C. Lupu, “Federalism and Faith Redux,” *Harvard Journal of Law and Public Policy* 33:3 (2010): 935-942.

<sup>527</sup> Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 454-63.



letter to the Danbury Baptist Association: “In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect ‘a wall of separation between church and state.’”<sup>528</sup>

Jefferson’s words preceded the first use of “secularism” as the separation of church and state by nearly seventy-five years. As discussed in chapter two, this usage appears to arise in the United States in 1876, with the formation of the National Liberal League to oppose the National Reform Association and their push for a Christian Amendment to the Constitution.<sup>529</sup> In the pages of *The Index*, founded as the official journal of the Free Religious Association, editor Francis Ellingwood Abbot drew a distinction between philosophical and political secularism. The former refers to a philosophical and ethical system founded by British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 (and elaborated further in the third subsection below). The latter notion, political secularism, is an American innovation, as Abbot borrowed Holyoake’s term while seeking a way to describe what he first called “liberalism,” derived from “liberal” in the sense of “free,” as it pertained to the “free religion” movement in which he and his journal were instrumental.<sup>530</sup> In 1876, writing in the year’s first issue of *The Index*, Abbot took “secularism” from philosophy to politics, just as he had done with free religion and liberalism:

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<sup>528</sup> *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing, et al*, 330 U.S. 1. 67 Sup. Ct. 504 (1947).

<sup>529</sup> Tisa Wenger, “The God-in-the-Constitution Controversy: American Secularisms in Historical Perspective,” *Comparative Secularisms in a Global Age*, ed. Linell E. Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 90.

<sup>530</sup> Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “The Demands of Liberalism,” April 6, 1872, *The Index: A Weekly Paper Devoted to Free Religion, Vol. 3*, ed. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, William James Potter, and Benjamin Franklin Underwood (Toledo, Ohio: Index Association, 1872), 108-109.

The religion of every free State is free religion; and free religion, on its political side, is absolute secularism -- the absolute restriction of government to the transaction of all public affairs by the simple rules of intelligence, justice, liberty, and equal rights, and the absolute exclusion of all rules introducing revelations or supernaturalisms or ecclesiasticisms of any sort. *This is the common religion of mankind.* Every special religion pretends to include it, but crucifies it in the act.<sup>531</sup>

Abbot makes a transitive connection between free religion as a religion or philosophy, free religion as politics, and in turn, secularism as the political arm of free religion. Abbot's understanding of the secular did not exclude religion, but rather, it was a new form of religion suitable for all. As with Holyoake's secularism, many of its adherents considered it a religion—free religion—and it was only much later that it came to be understood as above the sectarian fray rather than itself sectarian.<sup>532</sup>

In the 1920s, lacking strength as a movement and thus lacking defenders, secularism became the bugaboo of religious leaders in England and the United States. Members of the interwar Protestant ecumenical movement viewed secularism as the result of God's eviction from the earth, and they adopted the defeat of "secular civilization" as a rallying cry.<sup>533</sup> Writing in *The Crisis* in 1937, Baptist minister Benjamin E. Mays names secularism as the shared enemy that inspired the formation of the World Council of

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<sup>531</sup> Francis Ellingwood Abbot, "The Unfinished Window," January 6, 1876, *The Index: A Weekly Paper Devoted to Free Religion, Vol. 7*, ed. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, William James Potter, and Benjamin Franklin Underwood (Boston: Index Association), 6-7.

<sup>532</sup> Without reference to Abbot, Wilfred M. McClay draws the same distinction: McClay, "Two Concepts of Secularism," *The Wilson Quarterly* 24:3 (2000): 54-71. For McClay, there is a secularism that is "an opponent of established belief" and another secularism that is "a proponent of established unbelief" (63).

<sup>533</sup> See, for instance, *The Christian Life and Message in Relation to Non-Christian Systems* (Jerusalem Report), from the Jerusalem Meeting of the International Missionary Council held in 1927. I owe thanks for this insight to Justin Reynolds in the History Department at Columbia University, whose in-progress dissertation examines the interwar Protestant ecumenical movement.

Churches:

Regardless of the theological differences of the churches assembled, they were all conscious of a common peril—secularism and materialism. In some countries of Europe it is the domination of the nation-state. In the United States and England it is the peril of a highly mechanized material civilization. The recognition of a common enemy helped create unity.<sup>534</sup>

Surprisingly, when secularism re-enters the mainstream discourse of newspapers, books, and magazines in the decade following WWII, it means the separation of church and state.<sup>535</sup> The importance of Abbot's innovation is difficult to understate given that separation has become one of the central understandings of secularism and drives much of the recent scholarship on the secular. The gap between Abbot's usage among a fringe group of secularists and the term's mainstream adoption at the start of the Cold War remains mysterious and deserves historical attention in a future study.

A number of scholars have urged a reappraisal of secularism that frames it less as the *separation* of church and state, and more as a description of the various ways in which church and state *relate*. In Alfred Stepan's work on "multiple secularisms," he understands secularism as a variable relationship between the state, religion, and society.<sup>536</sup> In their edited volume, *Secularisms*, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini use the idea of "multiple or varied secularisms" to attend to cultural and religious variation and disrupt the simple

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<sup>534</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "The Church Surveys the World's Problems," *The Crisis* (October 1937): 316.

<sup>535</sup> For example, "The U.S. Spirit: A Moral Creed," uncredited, *LIFE Magazine*, July 23, 1956, 29; and Peter F. Drucker, "Organized Religion and the American Creed," *The Review of Politics*, 18:3 (Jul. 1956).

<sup>536</sup> Alfred Stepan, "The Multiple Secularisms of Modern Democracies and Autocracies," *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 115.

binary of religious and secular.<sup>537</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has offered an alternative taxonomy of secularisms, distinguishing between two types: a laicism that sees religion “as an adversary and an impediment to modern politics” and a Judeo-Christian secularism that sees religion “as a source of unity and identity that generates conflict in modern international politics.”<sup>538</sup> By demonstrating that the impetus for separation of church and state in nineteenth-century America was often deeply Protestant and motivated in part by nativist anti-Catholicism, others have, like Hurd, suggested that secularism is not as separate from the religious as it seems.<sup>539</sup>

American secular activists are strong advocates of a form of secularism that Stepan would consider separationist and Hurd would call laicist. Religion and politics have an adversarial relationship in this model, and religion’s influence on politics is detrimental to a healthy democracy. During an interview at SCA’s offices, one of its staff members emphasized this view by paraphrasing the organization’s mission statement: “Separation of church and state is the best guarantee of freedom for all.” The Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Atheists, the Center for Inquiry, and the American Humanist Association all have full-time staff who investigate potential violations of the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment, send letters threatening legal action, and rely on in-house or volunteer lawyers to file lawsuits and amicus briefs. They also compete for plaintiffs

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<sup>537</sup> Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “Introduction: Times Like These,” *Secularisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 14-16.

<sup>538</sup> Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, *The Politics of Secularism in International Relations* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 23.

<sup>539</sup> See Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007). For a less theoretical approach that avoids the term secularism on account of its ambiguity, but which is exhaustive in its analysis of legal sources, see Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*.

because a successful lawsuit brings publicity, and in turn, donations. Leaders I interviewed at three of the major organizations lamented the lack of coordination among attorneys filing separationist lawsuits. They felt that the more litigious organizations were too willing to file suits they might lose, thereby setting bad precedent and making it more difficult to bring future cases concerning the same or similar issues. While organizations might not agree on the means of pursuing the separation of church and state, they generally agree that the wall of separation should be strong and high.

## **2. The Secular Character of American Government: The Secular Public Sphere**

Lupu also introduced the idea of the secular as “a separate space, apart from religion, in which institutions may operate.” Private beliefs must remain largely restricted from this public space, and they should not enter into considerations like whether to teach evolution. For example, Lupu argued that evolution ought to be taught in public schools as a matter of its being accepted science, and any implications evolution may have for an understanding of the existence of God should be bracketed from classroom conversation. This includes both atheistic and positive statements of belief concerning God’s existence. In other words, the espousal of one’s privately held secular beliefs regarding the existence of God should remain out of secular public space inasmuch as they should not issue from those who represent the state and carry with them the weight of its authority.

By invoking the distinction between public presentation and private belief in order to separate secularism and atheism, Lupu pointed to the blurry boundary between separating church and state and delimiting a secular public sphere. High school science

teachers who represent the state in their professional capacity offer a clearer example of those who should avoid religious rationales than do politicians who represent their constituencies as well as the state. Legal scholar Kent Greenawalt has attempted to delineate with rigorous precision how and whether judges, legislators, and private citizens ought to rely on religious reasons in their public arguments and decisions.<sup>540</sup> The complexity of Greenawalt's account points to the challenge of drawing a sharp distinction between public and private, and in turn, secular and religious. These challenges have led some scholars to reconsider how and whether religion should be excluded from public political discourse<sup>541</sup> and even whether a secular public sphere remains a useful notion.<sup>542</sup>

SCA has developed a criterion for assessing whether and how private religious beliefs ought to impact the decisions of policy makers. Among SCA's three official issues expressly concerning government, two relate directly to the separation of church and state, and the third is better understood as relating to the secular public sphere. SCA lists the focuses of its opposition as follows:

The government and officials acting in their government capacity, should not endorse religious beliefs, one religion over another or religion over non-religion.

1. National Ceremonies and Symbols Endorsing Religion: Patriotic exercises that reference "God" are direct government endorsements of religion.
  - a. In God We Trust

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<sup>540</sup> Kent Greenawalt, *Private Consciences and Public Reasons* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>541</sup> Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). Judith Butler, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, ed. Eduardo Mendieta and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

<sup>542</sup> Craig Calhoun, "Secularism, Citizenship, and the Secular Public Sphere," in *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 75-91.

- b. National day of prayer
  - c. Oaths of office
  - d. Pledge of Allegiance
2. Government Officials Endorsing Religion: Legislators should not profess their personal religious beliefs when acting in their official capacity.
    - a. Legislative prayer
    - b. Prayer caucus
  3. Religiously Based Policy: Government officials should rely on high quality research, not personal religious beliefs, when making policy decisions.<sup>543</sup>

In grouping these positions together, SCA elides a distinction between the separation of church and state and the establishment or maintenance of a secular public sphere. The third category, in particular, raises the same questions Greenawalt addresses concerning how private conscience should influence public decisions. In SCA's view, the secular public sphere should regulate the presence and role of religion for those acting as government officials.

According to members of SCA's staff and its board of directors, the third category doubles as a guiding criterion for SCA's selection of the issues it supports. In the words of one of its leaders, SCA "will take a stand when someone is for something, where they shouldn't be basing their evidence on religion." SCA's Executive Director, Edwina Rogers, echoed this statement in a presentation she gave to an atheist group in New York City in May of 2012. When Rogers asked SCA's board why it supported certain issues and not others, they told her that the organization is only concerned with issues that policy makers decide based on their religious beliefs. SCA uses a thought experiment to identify which issues it supports and which it avoids. If someone could come to the conclusion through "high quality research, not personal religious beliefs" that abortion is both right and wrong,

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<sup>543</sup> Secular Coalition for America, "Issues: Government Action," 2012, available at <http://secular.org/content/government-action>, accessed February 18, 2013.

or that same-sex marriage is both right and wrong, then SCA will not take a stand on the issue. In the cases of abortion and climate change, SCA is silent; on same-sex marriage, SCA is in support. Because it is not obvious what constitutes “high quality research” and “personal religious beliefs,” these terms become the regulative conditions of the public sphere’s secularity. In turn, this version of secularism becomes the regulative condition of religion.<sup>544</sup>

During interviews, SCA’s leaders described this criterion as a practical way of avoiding controversial issues that might alienate those who would otherwise support their mission, such as atheists who do not support abortion and justify their position with scientific research. Though this indicates that the criterion might be a pragmatic way to minimize internal conflict, it is important that SCA justifies it according to the values of a secular public sphere. The criterion is not just an internal rule of thumb meant to reduce conflict, but it is an externally expressed value that justifies SCA’s decisions as much as it guides them. Not only does SCA’s mission include the protection and strengthening of the “secular character of American government,” but that secular character includes both the separation of church and state and the secularity of the public sphere.

A number of organizational leaders whom I interviewed see the early to mid-2000s as a turning point for secular activism because it was a time when many Americans began to perceive the impact religion can have on politics.<sup>545</sup> Jill, who holds a position at a

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<sup>544</sup> Hurd, *Politics of Secularism*.

<sup>545</sup> See also Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Politics and Generations,” *American Sociological Review* 67:2 (2002): 165. Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious



prominent humanist organization, described how she became involved with the freethought group on her college campus:

I was an activist in college. I got involved with a group called the [Georgetown] University Freethinkers. [...] That became my life. I decided, you know what, I am an atheist, and it is so important for me to stop this intrusion of religion in the public sphere. It was happening in college. I could see it happening in everyday life, and I wanted to make a difference that way.

Jill sees the public sphere as a space that extends beyond the domain of the state and includes her private university. Her concern for the secularity of the public sphere is distinct from her concern for the separation of church and state. Graduating from Georgetown in 2005, Jill's entry into secular activism coincided with public attempts to credit religion for the World Trade Center attacks and the two elections of George W. Bush. Though Jill's experience with her college freethought organization no doubt influenced her decision to become a full-time secular activist, her desire to preserve the secular public sphere plays a major role in her personal history.

According to another leader at the same humanist organization where Jill works, fundraising became much easier in the mid-2000s because they were "tapping into an environment where Bush was president and the Christian Right was everywhere." Ben, a leader at a major atheist organization, agrees that it was a watershed moment:

September 11<sup>th</sup> was huge for us. It was a religious event. When George W. Bush made it Christians versus Muslims—when he basically said the solution to this was more Christianity and really started to pipe in the faith-based initiatives and really started to push the God part from the office—George W. Bush did very well for us. He did lousy for the country, but he did very well for organized atheism. He made everybody see how bad it is when somebody pretty and stupid and religious gets into power.

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Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987–2012," *Sociological Science* 1 (2014): 423-447.

Philip, who founded a local organization in the New York City area, dated his involvement to an earlier period, citing the “Gingrich Revolution,” and seeing the early 1990s as the years in which the Religious Right rose to prominence. Two leaders I interviewed from a national secular humanist organization dated the rise of the Religious Right to even an earlier moment, in the 1980s. Though religion became salient for different leaders at different times, they consistently identified its threat to the secular public sphere as a turning point for secular activism.

### **3. Secularism as the Ideology of Nonbelief**

Todd Stiefel,<sup>546</sup> one of the major financial backers of secular activism in the United States, drew a similar distinction to the one Lupu drew between atheism and secularism:

Secularism tends to be misunderstood. There are two definitions of secular, one being the lack of religion. But secularism is more often associated with the lack of religion in government. From a strategic-movement level that people are pointing out, the Religious Right is trying to equate secularism with atheism so they can demonize it. Secularism is something broader than that politically. It includes the deists and the Reverend Barry Lynn [Executive Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State] and a whole army of religious people who believe in secular government.

As soon as the topic of secularism arose during our interview, Stiefel wanted to clarify that it was not the same as atheism. Like Lupu, by pre-emptively parsing secularism, Stiefel drew attention to a definition that he sought to avoid and demonstrated that he was aware of contemporary debates over its meaning. Understanding the origins of secularism as a term and concept will help explain why Stiefel finds it important to deny that secularism is

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<sup>546</sup> This is the same Todd from the end of chapter three who has asked me not to give him a pseudonym.

the ideology of nonbelief.

As mentioned in chapter two, George Jacob Holyoake first coined the word secularism in print in response to a letter to the editor from Edward Search, published in the June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1851 issue of Holyoake’s journal, *The Reasoner*.<sup>547</sup> Search was a pseudonym used by Holyoake’s friend and benefactor, W.H. Ashurst, who argued in his letter that given the limits of knowledge, no one could be certain that God does not exist—a skeptical position that would become known as agnosticism once Thomas Huxley coined the term in 1869.<sup>548</sup> Looking for a more suitable label than “Atheist,” Ashurst suggested “Secularist,” from which Holyoake extrapolated “Secularism” to describe “the work we have always had in hand, and how it is larger than Atheism, and includes it.”<sup>549</sup> Throughout the rest of his life, Holyoake attempted to distinguish secularism from atheism so as to preserve that sense of agnosticism, and also to incorporate other valences that he believed atheism could not adequately capture. In a letter declining the Vice-Presidency of the National Secular Society in Britain, Holyoake criticized the organization for thinking “Atheism is identical with Secularism,” and stated further that “the essential difference between Secularism and Atheism” is “so important to keep clear.”<sup>550</sup>

Writing in *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* in 1896, Holyoake foregrounded the moral dimension that secularism adds to nontheism:

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<sup>547</sup> Edward Search, “On the word atheist,” June 25, 1851, in *The Reasoner and Theological Examiner, Volume 11*, ed. George Jacob Holyoake, (London: James Watson), 87-88.

<sup>548</sup> Aaron Holland, “Agnosticism,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007).

<sup>549</sup> Search, 88.

<sup>550</sup> Joseph McCabe, *Life and Letters of George Jacob Holyoake, Vol. 2* (London: Watts & Co., 1908), 58.

The term Secularism was chosen to express the extension of freethought to ethics. [...] Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: 1. The improvement of this life by material means. 2. That science is the available Providence of man. 3. That it is good to do good.<sup>551</sup>

Here Holyoake outlines a philosophy that is centered on the natural world (as opposed to the supernatural), emphasizes morality, and valorizes science as the method and means for accomplishing the morally good. Holyoake wanted “secularism” to provide a positive statement of belief, as opposed to “atheism,” which he thought could only express the lack of belief in God. Though many organized nonbelievers in America today would use “humanism” to describe the set of values Holyoake describes, Stiefel’s pre-emptive denial points to the persistence of secularism as a term for the ideology of nonbelief. In Lupu’s case, he saw that the two halves of the Secular Coalition for America’s mission use “secular” to unite both advocacy for nontheists and the separation of religion and government. In tacitly conflating the two, SCA invokes secularism’s original meaning.

As outlined above, American secularism split into philosophical and political secularism in the 1870s, giving rise to the possibility of Stiefel’s distinction. Unlike Holyoake, who recognized no distinction within secularism, certain secular activists want political secularism to be a big tent category that can unify nonbelievers and believers in support of the separation of church and state—regardless of whether individuals consider themselves spiritual, religious, or nonreligious. In his presentation at the House briefing, Lupu offered a slightly different but similarly broad notion of the secular that includes

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<sup>551</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1896), 34-35.

spiritual and religious Americans who believe “government should be secular.” Lupu shares his view with Georgetown University Professor Jacques Berlinerblau, whose book, *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom*, was published just before the House briefing, in September of 2012.<sup>552</sup> Berlinerblau argues that his understanding of secularism “seems powerful, precise, and the most conducive to its survival”:

Secularism is a political philosophy, which, at its core, is preoccupied with, and often deeply suspicious of, any and all relations between government and religion. It translates that preoccupation into various strategies of governance, all of which seek to balance two necessities: (1) the individual citizen’s need for freedom of, or freedom from, religion, and (2) a state’s need to maintain order.<sup>553</sup>

Berlinerblau, like Stiefel, wants secularism to be broadly inclusive so that the separation of church and state can be an important issue for many Americans and not just nonbelievers. Though Stiefel is an openly strong supporter of SCA, he remains concerned about the polysemy of the secular and the conflation of nontheism and the separation of church and state. Yet as this chapter’s concluding section makes clear, the secular’s polysemy is crucial for SCA’s attempts to balance its commitment to both halves of its mission: to advocate for nontheists and to strengthen the secular character of American government.

The briefing’s third panelist, Greg Epstein, most clearly elided a distinction between nontheism and secularism. Epstein is the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and author of *Good Without God*, a book that argues that humanism, much like Holyoake’s secularism, articulates the positive, moral beliefs of nonbelievers.<sup>554</sup> Throughout his

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<sup>552</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012).

<sup>553</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>554</sup> Greg Epstein, *Good Without God* (New York: William Morrow, 2009).

presentation, Epstein linked humanism and the secular, at times switching back and forth between the labels without drawing any distinction: “Humanists and secular Americans are people with strong positive values [...] We’re putting our values in action. Those are secular values. That’s humanism. The only reason we need a congressional briefing today is that most people don’t understand what secular Americans are about.” Epstein’s elision is common for organized nonbelievers who consider themselves part of the “secular movement,” though not all organized nonbelievers choose to identify themselves as “secular.” Some activists I interviewed argue that there are multiple, overlapping movements that include atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists, and other kinds of nonbelievers. While organized nonbelievers sometimes talk about the “humanist movement,” the “secular movement,” or the “atheist movement,” no one term can fully capture the heterogeneity that certain subgroups of nonbelievers continually reassert.<sup>555</sup> The following subsection will look at the special role activists’ framing of the secular plays in their growing efforts to form an identity-based social movement.

#### **4. Secular Identity**

One of the most influential leaders in contemporary secular activism was the second panelist at SCA’s House briefing, David Niose. Though Niose has been the President of SCA since January 2013, he was President of the American Humanist Association at the time of the briefing. As discussed in greater length in chapter three, Niose was also the lead attorney in a lawsuit recently decided by the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court

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<sup>555</sup> Craig Calhoun, *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1994).

challenging the presence of “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, *Doe v. Acton Boxborough Regional School District*.<sup>556</sup> In a book published just three months before SCA’s House briefing, and which I discussed briefly near the end of chapter one, Niose outlines an argument for the existence of an identity-oriented social movement constructed by and for secular Americans.<sup>557</sup> According to Niose, more Americans than ever have become involved in secular activism in the twenty-first century, and many nonbelievers are now publicly emphasizing their secular identities.<sup>558</sup>

Self-reported growth in membership, budget, and staff of the major organizations supports Niose’s claims, as do survey data on Americans’ religious affiliations. According to the results of a poll released by the Pew Research Center in October of 2012, one-in-five Americans have no religious affiliation, an increase of nearly a third since 2007.<sup>559</sup> The figure is much greater for those under thirty, with nearly one-third (32%) choosing not to identify with any religion. The number of those identifying as atheist or agnostic has increased by half in the last five years, now comprising six percent of the population. A little more than two-thirds of those with no affiliation say they believe in God (68%), and more than a third consider themselves spiritual but not religious (37%). The number of Americans who are nontheistic and the number of those who do not affiliate with any

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<sup>556</sup> *Doe v. Acton-Boxborough Regional School District*, 468 Mass. 64, at 72 (2014).

<sup>557</sup> David Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 197-202.

<sup>558</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-148.

<sup>559</sup> Cary Funk, Greg Smith, and Luis Lugo, “Nones” on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2012), available at [http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious\\_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/None sOnTheRise-full.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/uploadedFiles/Topics/Religious_Affiliation/Unaffiliated/None%20OnTheRise-full.pdf), accessed November 24, 2012.

religion are on the rise, and trends among those under thirty suggest that growth will continue.

Asking whether or not these Americans are “secular” gets at the heart of the ambiguity of a secular identity. For Niose, secular Americans are only those who are “personally secular,” by which he means those who are nontheistic in their private belief, but who may or may not identify with markers like atheist, humanist, agnostic, or secularist.<sup>560</sup> Though he goes so far as to suggest that those Americans who “sympathize with a secular worldview” while believing in some supernatural concepts might be counted among secular Americans, he leaves the question open.<sup>561</sup> As mentioned in the previous section, Lupu and Berlinerblau both argue for an alternative and more capacious understanding of secular that includes spiritual and religious Americans who support the separation of church and state. That Niose and Berlinerblau should publish their books within four months of the first-ever Congressional briefing concerning the secular is no coincidence. Competition over the framing of the secular and secularism has intensified at a time when more Americans than ever are claiming no religious affiliation, identifying openly as nontheistic, and becoming involved with secular activism.

For his panel presentation, SCA asked Niose to speak about the “secular movement,” which he argued is less than a decade old. He described this movement as “a demographic emergence—an awakening of various types of nonreligious Americans who are tired of being overlooked in public dialogue and society generally.” As he does in *Nonbeliever Nation*, Niose argued that secular Americans must respond to the rise of the Religious Right

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<sup>560</sup> Niose, 11-13.

<sup>561</sup> Niose, 15.



by emphasizing collective identity or “group pride.” He described a recent shift in attitude among nonbelievers, where “Maybe people used to get up and say, ‘I’m a conservative,’ ‘I’m a liberal,’ ‘a feminist,’ ‘gay.’ Now they’re getting up and saying, ‘I’m an atheist.’ [...] There’s a movement to normalize atheism across the country.” In the question and answer period, he reiterated the need for public secularism: “This is what the secular movement is all about. [...] We need this secular demographic that deserves respect to also stand up. There’s an entire demographic that’s being discriminated against.”

As discussed in chapter three, Niose wants secular Americans to “come out.” He borrows this idea from other secular activists, who in turn, borrowed it from the LGBT rights movement.<sup>562</sup> Niose is rare among activists in urging nonbelievers to “come out” as explicitly “secular.” While many organized nonbelievers with whom I spoke identify as secular and see it as a useful umbrella category, most do not use it as their primary label. One young leader who does identify strongly as a “secularist” explained to me his reasoning:

I consider myself secularist because I'm really in support of separation of church and state and not having religion influence public life. Recently I've become more friendly to the term secularist, and I really think that's because my focus has been more on the influence of religion on public life. If that's what I'm mainly concerned with, I just tell people I'm a secular person, or I'm a secularist. I don't really care what you believe personally so long as you're not forcing it on anyone else.

By contrast, another leader named Charles who works at the Secular Student Alliance explained to me why he identifies first and foremost as an atheist:

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<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 89-92, 127-29. See also Jesse M. Smith, “Creating a Godless Community: The Collective Identity Work of Contemporary American Atheists,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 52:1 (2013): 84-85. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, “Secular humanism and atheism beyond progressive secularism,” *Sociology of Religion* 68:4 (2007): 421.

I think that atheist is certainly the most politically charged word, and because of that, I'm quick to use it when I'm talking about myself in public. If I don't use "atheist," people think I'm being bashful. It's just better to come out and say it. [...] If I'm on an airplane and someone asks me what I do, I say, "I'm a professional atheist."

When meeting someone new, Charles chooses to commit a political act that advocates for nonbelievers by calling himself "atheist," rather than leave his identity ambiguous by using the term "secular"—despite its appearing in the name of the organization for which he works. Because of the secular's polysemy, SCA often faces a similar decision: Should it frame the secular as nontheistic, should it leave the question open, or should it frame it as the separation of church and state or the appropriate type of public sphere? The following section demonstrates how SCA employs all of these options in attempting to fulfill the two sides of its mission.

### **The Work of a Polysemous Secular**

SCA and the secular movement as a whole use the polysemy of the secular as a way to align its various meanings when consensus is required and to distinguish among them when targeting specific sub-groups with narrower interests.<sup>563</sup> When unifying its member organizations, SCA understands secular as an umbrella category for all nontheists. When lobbying alongside the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, secularism is the separation of church and state. And when SCA's President and other secular activists want to create a big tent for mobilizing as many Americans as possible, secular can refer to spiritual or theistic Americans with no religious affiliation. Looking at a few examples in

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<sup>563</sup> On frame alignment, see David A. Snow, E. Burke Rochford, Jr., Steven K. Worden and Robert D. Benford, "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51:4 (1986): 464-481.

addition to those already discussed will make clear the political advantages of a polysemous secular.

SCA is aware of the secular's polysemy and navigates it carefully in its public materials. In the "Vision" statement of its Secular Decade plan, SCA describes the America it would like to see: "An America that has returned to its secular roots and where secularism is an influential, respected force in American civic life, and in which there are numerous openly nontheistic elected officials."<sup>564</sup> In this one sentence, SCA creates a bridge between the two sides of its mission by moving from "secular roots" and the implied tradition of the separation of church and state, to a phrase about secularism that could imply either separation or nonbelief, and finally to an explicit reference to nontheists. All of this work hinges on an implication that there are secular values (that follow from nontheism), there are secular values (that undergird secular government), and there is a relationship between the two.

One of the secondary goals in creating SCA was to unite the national nonbeliever organizations, some of which are effectively sects of one another that have arisen from disputes among leadership. Despite fighting for many years over members and donors, the sixteen member organizations now share the financial burden of supporting SCA and send members to annual meetings of the board. SCA brings together a wide range of nonbelievers through its member organizations. In an interview, the leader of one organization described his members as "the marines of the atheist movement," while another leader told me that most of her members consider themselves religious. Even the

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<sup>564</sup> Sean Faircloth, "Our Secular Decade," *Secular Coalition for America*, 2012, available at [http://www.secular.org/files/our\\_secular\\_decade.pdf](http://www.secular.org/files/our_secular_decade.pdf), accessed October 19, 2012.

Council for Secular Humanism is now a member organization, though it took Paul Kurtz's marginalization and eventual ouster from the Center for Inquiry for it to join. As discussed in previous chapters, in 1978, Kurtz left his position at the American Humanist Association and founded a number of organizations in the ensuing years, including the Council for Secular Humanism in 1980. Throughout his tenure as head of the Center for Inquiry, an umbrella for all of Kurtz's organizations, he consciously avoided collaboration, and at times, he tried to annex organizations that he saw as competitors. Kurtz's successor, Ronald Lindsay, is more interested in collaboration and gave approval for the Council for Secular Humanism to join SCA in 2010.

Though a polysemous secular helps SCA create a big tent, drawing distinctions at key moments is necessary for working with allies who might only agree with part of its mission. Recruiting member organizations, seeking allied and endorsing organizations, and presenting itself in coalitions alongside other lobbying groups all require different combinations of the secular. For instance, some of SCA's member organizations consider themselves religious, albeit nontheistic. The American Ethical Union, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the Unitarian Universalist Humanists are all registered with the federal government as religious nonprofits and understand themselves as religions.<sup>565</sup> They see no contradiction in being both religious and nontheistic, and many of their members prefer to call themselves religious humanists. As discussed in the second chapter,

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<sup>565</sup> The American Ethical Union is the umbrella organization for independently run Ethical Culture Societies throughout the United States. The Society for Humanistic Judaism has the same relationship to its independent Societies. The Unitarian Universalist Humanists are religious humanists who are part of the Unitarian Universalist (UU) Association and operate within UU congregations.

all three of these groups could be accurately described as secular religions; they are religious members of the Secular Coalition for America.

When the American Ethical Union was considering joining SCA, its name, mission, vision, and issues were all important considerations. Two leaders whom I interviewed told me that members of the Ethical movement were hesitant to ally themselves with an organization that considers itself “secular” given the wide range of connotations the term carries. For a time, Ethical Culture leaders were stuck on the wording of SCA’s name and felt they could only join if SCA would change it to the Coalition for a Secular America. This would allow Ethical Culture to be a member of a coalition that supports a secular America but is not itself secular. SCA refused the change, and in 2008, the American Ethical Union set aside its concerns and became a member organization. Ultimately, the AEU felt it could agree with SCA’s mission, as the majority of its members consider themselves nontheists who support the separation of church and state.

During the briefing’s question and answer period, one House staffer sought to clarify the distinction between atheism and secularism and asked whether SCA chooses “to focus on the secular component” when lobbying. She observed that “even people who are extremely religious don’t want to recite something of another religion,” and wondered how and whether SCA emphasizes the separation of church and state. The implication of her question, as she phrased it, was that she thought combining advocacy for nontheists and the separation of church and state might undermine separation. Niose responded to her question by noting that SCA works with groups like the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and People for the American Way in an effort to build

coalitions with religious moderates to combat the Religious Right. Its mission to promote separation allows SCA to work alongside even avowedly religious organizations like the Baptist Joint Committee and the Interfaith Alliance. By participating in coalitions, SCA gains access to prominent politicians in ways that might not otherwise be available to an organization that lobbies for nontheists. For instance, SCA works with the Coalition Against Religious Discrimination, which has dozens of member organizations across a range of sectors. One SCA staffer told me that these relations can sometimes become tense because, for instance, other members of a coalition might not appreciate publicized anti-religious remarks by Richard Dawkins. She also emphasized that such coalitions are very beneficial for a relatively small and new lobbying operation like SCA.

While many of SCA's coalition partners support separation, its advocacy for America's nontheists is what makes SCA distinct and able to attract the nonbeliever organizations from which it primarily draws its support. Many nonbelievers, especially those who actively organize, are conscious of and concerned with discrimination against secular Americans. According to a study conducted in 2006, Americans are less accepting of atheists than any other group, including more salient bogeymen like gays, Muslims, and Jews.<sup>566</sup> Speaking to a group of student leaders at a conference I attended in Columbus, Ohio, Edwina Rogers told her audience that SCA's "mission is to increase the visibility of nonbelievers and to fight for equal rights." Having advocates communicate their interests to state and national governments appeals to nontheists for the same reason a secular

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<sup>566</sup> Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review* 71 (2006): 211-234.

identity does: it normalizes their beliefs by officializing them and brings their voices into the public sphere. For organizations like American Atheists, who have a reputation for taking iconoclastic and confrontational positions, a unified secular identity in the form of SCA also provides them indirect access to government officials who would otherwise likely spurn them.

### **Conclusion: Secularism, secularism, and the Secular**

In his final remarks during the briefing, Greg Epstein drew a distinction between two kinds of secular: one with an uppercase *S* and one with a lowercase *s*. Whereas the former denotes the secular movement, the latter denotes the broad range of values for which it fights and which many religious Americans share. Epstein concluded that SCA needs partners who share its *secular* values as much as its *Secular* values. In order to advocate for nontheists, SCA depends on broad-based coalitions and requires the support of more than just nontheistic Americans. To fulfill both halves of its mission, SCA makes use of a polysemous secular that allows it to conflate and distinguish among multiple meanings depending on the context.

By identifying and elaborating specific sites in which actors challenge the limits of what the secular can mean and the work those meanings can accomplish, this chapter documents the making and re-making of the contemporary American secular. In doing so, it participates in Talal Asad's "more modest endeavor," demonstrating who defines the secular, in what context, how, and why. In turn, this chapter brings the theoretical insights of the study of secularism and the secular into conversation with the scholarship now

emerging from the social science of nonbelievers. Approaches that argue against or ignore certain understandings of the secular, or that impose an understanding that claims to cut across or contain all other understandings, obscure the work that a polysemous secular already accomplishes. Attending carefully to the polysemy and variety of terms and labels used by organized nonbelievers and secular activists reveals how these terms both respond to and enable new kinds of political action while influencing what scholars and the mainstream public mean and understand by the secular's many invocations.



## **CONCLUSION:**

### **Toward a Study of the American Secular**

This dissertation has described many of the people, groups, and institutions who participate in making the American secular. Chapter one surveyed the organized nonbelievers most interested in purifying themselves, their speech, and their organizations of religious pollution. By listening carefully to how they talk and observing what practices and forms of organization they avoid, I have elaborated the multiple religious imaginaries they create in order to remain purely secular. Attending to their taboos reveals the boundaries, variously constructed, that undergird their distinctions between secular and religious. Growing acceptance of “spiritual” and “mystical” practices by even very anti-religious nonbelievers like Sam Harris blurs these boundaries, though for some, so does the very act of forming groups. Disagreements about the correct ways of being secular spur conflicts among nonbelievers and their organizations, and they result in a great amount of diversity within the secular.

Chapter two built on chapter one’s framework in order to show how many of today’s organized nonbelievers embrace religion, either directly or by analogy, creating a variety of secular/religious hybrids. By demonstrating how nonbelievers construct multiple versions of their traditions, I also showed how groups embrace and distance themselves from their complicated histories. Many of today’s groups arose from movements within Reform Judaism and Unitarianism, and all nonbeliever groups have deeper influences in the Enlightenment, the secular religions created in the wake of the French Revolution, Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity, and George Jacob Holyoake’s religiously ambiguous Secularism. In addition to liberal religion’s influences on the various

formations of the American secular, I have also shown how organized nonbelievers and conservative evangelicals have played a role in constituting one another, especially since the late 1970s. Their long history of opposition includes nineteenth-century conflicts between the National Reform Association and various incarnations of the American Secular Union, as well as the interwar Protestant ecumenical movement's appropriation of "secularism" as an enemy of Christianity. Not wanting to tell a story that centers on these conflicts and gives the impression of an evangelical/secular binary, I have tried to couch them in a far more complicated narrative in which they appear as occasional flash points of opposition rather than the very means by which religious and secular become defined.

Chapter three offered the first of two case studies in which I relied on the theoretical framework built in chapters one and two to explain the seemingly contradictory ways in which organized nonbelievers have presented themselves to the courts in recent years. By showing how each organization grounded its suit in a particular understanding of the secular/religious, and by observing the goals that each hoped to achieve in its challenge to the law, I both re-emphasized the diversity of American nonbelief and argued for the unique role that the courts play in constructing the American secular. Supreme Court decisions have influenced the founding ideologies of organizations like American Atheists and the Council for Secular Humanism. Nonbeliever groups' challenges to the specialness of religion from both within and without have transformed the courts' interpretation of the secular/religious and threatened its ability to adjudicate based on the First Amendment. This reciprocal relationship between nonbeliever groups and the law tells an important

piece of a larger story about the state's role in patterning that which Americans call "religion."

Chapter four also makes use of the frameworks developed in previous chapters in order to explain why scholars, nonbelievers, and Congressional staffers were often talking past one another at the first-ever Congressional briefing organized by secular lobbyists. The briefing was a rare moment in which these groups encountered each other in a physical space to discuss issues directly related to the secular and secularism. By distinguishing among various understandings and observing the ways in which activists and others make use of the secular's polysemy, the chapter aims to clarify for scholars what these terms mean in practice and in theory. Hopefully it also helps them situate their own acts of secular production within a more nuanced view of their potential consequences. In the chapter's conclusion, I warn against versions of the secular and secularism that differ enough from those presented at the Congressional briefing that they risk occluding the many types of work that non-academic secular formations accomplish. Recent scholars of the secular, in particular, ought to ask themselves why they are now reaching for terms like the "secular" and "secularism" to create assemblages that include people, things, and institutions that did not previously bear those names. What work do these new secular formations accomplish, what asymmetries in power do they reorganize, and whom do they ultimately benefit?

I leave these questions open, though I return to them, directly and indirectly, throughout the remainder of this chapter. In the pages that follow, I recapitulate this dissertation's core arguments in order to briefly outline the contributions it makes to the

study of organized nonbelievers, the study of the secular, and the study of American religion. I then offer a speculative story about secular/religion's shifting boundary that sketches a plan for future research, and I conclude with a few remarks on entanglement and reflexivity.

### **1. Contributions to the Study of Organized Nonbelievers**

The most important contribution this dissertation makes to the study of organized nonbelievers is putting the social scientific research that remains largely atheoretical in conversation with the increasingly well-established study of the secular and secularism. Theorists like Asad, Jakobsen and Pellegrini, Mahmood, and Modern accomplish crucial work that should change how social scientists of nonbelief use terms like “secular” and “secularism” and encourage them to stop drawing a sharp line between the secular and religious by imagining them as separate.<sup>567</sup> Even those who see them as “two sides of the same coin” or symbiotic in their opposition do not adequately capture their categorical promiscuity.<sup>568</sup> Both emically and etically, these groups cross that boundary again and again, and though some imagine themselves in opposition to conservative religion, others

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<sup>567</sup> Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003). Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, “World Secularisms at the Millennium: Introduction,” *Social Text* 18:3 (2000): 1-27; eds., *Secularisms* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). Saba Mahmood, “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire: The Politics of Islamic Reformation,” *Public Culture* 18:2 (2006): 323-347. John Lardas Modern, *Secularism in Antebellum America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). See also, Matthew Engelke, “Christianity and the Anthropology of Secular Humanism,” *Current Anthropology* 55:10 (December 2014): 292-301.

<sup>568</sup> Stephen LeDrew, “Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism,” *Sociology of Religion* 74:4 (2013): 469. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism & Community in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

consider themselves both “religious” and “secular,” and many more will frequently partner with religious groups in coalitions big and small, local and national.

For social scientists of nonbelief who remain uninterested in these valuable theoretical insights,<sup>569</sup> this dissertation also provides a careful study of the various labels that organized nonbelievers adopt, including atheism, agnosticism, religious humanism, secular humanism, freethought, secularism, rationalism, and Ethical Culture. Because many of these terms overlap, they are not exclusive, though this does not mean that they are interchangeable. Too much recent research treats them as synonyms, and far too often, sociologists use the terms “atheists” or “New Atheists” as umbrella categories, despite the fact that these are frequently hardline identities that many in the activist movement do not claim for themselves.<sup>570</sup> In general, the persistent use of little more than identity theory and social movement theory has limited the value of this emerging research, and much rigorous work remains.

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<sup>569</sup> Several important edited volumes have been written by sociologists, in particular, but their keen insights have not influenced sociologists of nonbelief. See Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer, Jonathan Vanantwerpen, “Introduction,” *Rethinking Secularism*, ed. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and Vanantwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, eds., *What Matters? Ethnographies of Value in a (not so) Secular Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Philip Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan Vanantwerpen, eds., *The Post-Secular in Question* (New York: New York University Press, 2012).

<sup>570</sup> See, for instance, Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*; Katja M. Guenther, Kerry Mulligan, and Cameron Papp, “From the Outside In: Crossing Boundaries to Build Collective Identity in the New Atheist Movement,” *Social Problems* 60:4 (2013): 457–75; Guenther, “Bounded by Disbelief: How Atheists in the United States Differentiate themselves from Religious Believers,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29:1 (2014): 1-16; Stephen Kettell, “Faithless: The Politics of New Atheism,” *Secularism and Nonreligion* 2 (2013); Kettell, “Divided We Stand: The Politics of the Atheist Movement in the United States,” *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 29:3 (2014): 377-391; Stephen LeDrew, “Toward a Critical Sociology of Atheism.”

As a study of nonbeliever groups nationwide, this dissertation is not entirely unique given Cimino and Smith's recent volume. Thus far, however, it is the only study to focus specifically on the network of leaders and activists who run these organizations and play key roles in the variously named social movement in which they participate. The dissertation also contributes an historical synthesis that draws upon many primary sources that have received little or no attention in the existing scholarship, and in its identification of the moments in which secularism came to mean the separation of church and state, its contribution is entirely unique. By focusing on lawsuits filed by nonbeliever organizations, the dissertation extends the study of organized nonbelievers into legal sociology and an emerging subfield it shares with religious studies and legal studies. The dissertation's fourth chapter is the first to study nonbelievers' lobbying efforts and their interactions with non-legislative branches of government, and its primary purpose is to clarify existing uses of the secular and secularism. A version of this chapter that I published in a journal read primarily by sociologists contains an overview of recent theoretical approaches to the secular with the express purpose of bridging the divide between the two literatures.<sup>571</sup>

By raising entanglement as a problem, this dissertation also asks for those who study organized nonbelievers to reflect on their complex relationships with their objects of research. Several prominent scholars in the field are actively involved with nonbeliever groups, and at least one demographer working in this area serves on the board of a large organization. As I demonstrated in chapter two, many of the histories I consulted in writing this dissertation were written by members of nonbeliever groups, especially humanists,

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<sup>571</sup> Joseph Blankholm, "The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular," *The Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 53:4 (2014), 775-790.

and their narratives are conscious attempts to bound their own traditions.<sup>572</sup> In general, the field needs far more scholars conducting historical research.<sup>573</sup> Though I do not agree with Bourdieu that the close material and social ties between those who study organized nonbelievers and the groups themselves are necessarily barriers to the production of valuable scholarship because I do not think it is possible to “objectivate” all “interests,” I concur with his argument and that of Courtney Bender that these ties should be objects within the scope of the field.<sup>574</sup>

## 2. Contributions to the Study of the Secular

I am grateful for the valuable theoretical contributions that have provincialized the secular and made this project legible to me as a possibility. To extend those insights and offer a contribution, I have crafted a parochial secular formation that attends to its own

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<sup>572</sup> See, for instance, Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2004); Mason Olds, *American Religious Humanism* (Minneapolis: Fellowship of Religious Humanists, 1996); Vern L. Bullough, “Humanism,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2007); Corliss Lamont, *The Philosophy of Humanism*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Washington D.C.: Humanist Press, 1997); Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1969); Nicolas Walter, *Humanism: Finding Meaning in the Word* (London: Rationalist Press Association, 1994). Though I do not know Sidney Warren’s biography, his otherwise valuable and unique history contains a great deal of bias in favor of a certain narrow understanding of secularism. See Warren, *American Freethought: 1860-1914* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1943),

<sup>573</sup> I have heard from one of the manuscript’s reviewers that Leigh Schmidt has written a history of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century atheism, though I do not yet know the title of the monograph as of April 1, 2015.

<sup>574</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, “Sociologists of Belief and Beliefs of Sociologists,” trans. Véronique Altglas and Matthew Wood, *Nordic Journal of Religion and Society* 23:1 (2010): 1-7. Courtney Bender, “Things in Their Entanglements,” in *The Post-Secular in Question*, ed. Philip S. Gorski, David Kyuman Kim, John Torpey, and Jonathan VanAntwerpen (New York: NYU Press, 2012), 43-76.

limits and identifies turning points in its ongoing reconstruction that have enabled new projects and restricted old ones from continuing to bear its name. By this I mean a play on both senses of the term “parochial”: local church parishes and a narrow scope or understanding. In the first sense, I have examined ostensibly and avowedly secular organizations that relate to religion through sameness, difference, and analogy. In the second sense, I have cut American secularism down to size, or at least offered a version that seems more in proportion to the organizations and activists I studied. For instance the secular movement is miniscule in scale when compared to the organizing and financial power of the Religious Right.<sup>575</sup> My secular formation hardly resembles a pervasive, subject-conditioning environment or the imperial technics of Europe and the United States.

I do not raise this concern to argue for monosemy; to the contrary, I worry that by focusing on these grand formations, scholars will lose sight of the everyday secular and the work that its polysemy accomplishes. The big formations could occlude the small, and scholars risk understanding neither. For instance, this dissertation has tried to identify particular moments in the evolution of the secular and its related terms, such as secularism and humanism. In so doing, it does not merely identify the publication in which a word like “secularism” came to mean the separation of church and state.<sup>576</sup> Rather, I have tried to

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<sup>575</sup> For a study that parallels this dissertation in its focus on the leadership network of American evangelicalism, see Michael Lindsay, *Faith in the Halls of Power: How Evangelicals Joined the American Elite* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Fittingly, the scale of Lindsay’s research exceeds my own.

<sup>576</sup> Francis Ellingwood Abbot, “The Unfinished Window,” January 6, 1876, *The Index: A Weekly Paper Devoted to Free Religion*, Vol. 7, ed. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, William James Potter, and Benjamin Franklin Underwood (Boston: Index Association), 6-7. The phrase “separation of church and state” first appears in a letter Thomas Jefferson wrote to the Danbury Baptists. See Jefferson, Letter to Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, and



show how these moments are turning points because they enable polysemous work to occur.

Once secularism means the separation of church and state, it does not stop meaning the ideology of nonbelief, nor does it no longer bear its association with Holyoake's Secularism. From that point on, it can mean something new, and as a constellation of cognates, the secular can accomplish the kind of work that I demonstrate in chapter four: advocating for the narrow interests of nonbelievers while building coalitions with broader and more powerful groups. These seemingly small moments can also shed light on why contradictory uses like the "secular as neutral" and the "secular as an identity" came into existence.<sup>577</sup> Though neither their etymologies nor even their genealogies can resolve that contradiction, they at least describe the context of its development. Only by focusing on a parochial secular formation like those I develop in this dissertation do these turning points and their significance become legible.

As with those who study nonbelievers, I have also encouraged theorists of the secular to situate themselves within their field. Chapters three and four show that scholars of the secular and secular activists not only read each other's books and articles and attend the same conferences, but they are sometimes even sitting across from one another, engaged in deep debate about the secular.<sup>578</sup> Scholars have yet to adequately explain why

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Stephen S. Neslon, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association in the State of Connecticut (Jan. 1, 1802), quoted in Daniel L. Dreisbach, "Sowing Useful Truths and Principles: The Danbury Baptists, Thomas Jefferson, and the 'Wall of Separation,'" *Journal of Church and State*, 39:468 (1997).

<sup>577</sup> For more on this tension see

<sup>578</sup> In addition to the Congressional briefing, another good example is the 2012 American Academy of Religion roundtable in response to Jacques Berlinerblau's book, *How to Be*

the first secular social movement since the nineteenth century has emerged at the same time that scholars have become so interested in studying secularism. I doubt we are all driven by publishers' anticipation of a reading public, and I remain skeptical that a reaction to the so-called resurgence of religion suffices as an explanation for both phenomena. Given the disparate trajectories I outlined above, they are certainly not catalyzing one another directly. Regardless of the shared underlying causes, scholars and activists alike participate in secular *poiēsis*. What are scholars up to? Why have they produced *these particular* secular formations? Why have they not produced others, and why have they mostly overlooked the other public figures who most frequently use the terms "secular" and "secularism"? These are worthy questions that the study of the secular might be able to answer.

### **3. Contributions to the Study of Religion**

One of the consequences of my secular formation is that it contributes to a phenomenon that I also study: the religionization and pluralization of the secular. As I discussed in chapters three and four, a growing subset of nonbelievers has asked the courts to consider it a religious minority, and all of the major nonbeliever organizations participate in efforts to create a "secular" identity (though they remain flexible about the specific labels that individual nonbelievers adopt). While some leaders have debated

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*Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2012). I discuss the book's entangled aim in chapter four. These responses and a contribution from Berlinerblau were published as an "Exchange" in *Critical Research on Religion* 1:2 (2013): 214-232. Kathryn Lofton's contribution, "Secular Shadowboxing," is characteristically on point.

whether it would be appropriate for nonbelievers to be on the Advisory Council on Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships, organizations like American Atheists, the Harvard Humanist Chaplaincy, and the Secular Coalition for America all condemned the exclusion of atheists from the interfaith service that followed the Boston Marathon bombing.<sup>579</sup>

Nonbelievers are certainly a precarious religious minority, and by no means would I label all nonbelievers “religious,” but increasingly, nonbelief is becoming one more option in the pantheon of American religious pluralism.<sup>580</sup>

Recognizing that I am part of an emerging scholarly field that studies nonbelievers and the secular, I helped Per Smith found the Secularism and Secularity program unit of the American Academy of Religion in late 2012. I am writing this dissertation from the discipline of Religious Studies, for the goal of receiving a doctorate in Religion, in advance of taking job as an Assistant Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Though I did not realize it when I began this project, I have since become aware that I am participating, quite clearly, in making the American secular. I anticipate that when I offer courses on “Atheism” and “Secularism,” they will draw students who consider themselves “seekers.” One student in a course I taught on atheism was frustrated on the last day of class because we never reached the kernel of wisdom or truth that it offers. To be clear, I welcome such students, though I doubt my courses will satisfy that

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<sup>579</sup> Hemant Mehta, “Today’s Interfaith Service in Boston Will Exclude Atheists,” *The Friendly Atheist*, April 18, 2013, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/04/18/todays-interfaith-service-in-boston-will-exclude-atheists/>.

<sup>580</sup> On the production of such an option and the concept of pluralism, see Courtney Bender and Pamela Klassen’s introduction to a volume they edited, *After Pluralism: Reimagining Religious Engagement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 1-28.

particular desire.<sup>581</sup> One of the aims of this dissertation is to argue that Religious Studies scholars should include nonbelievers and the secular in their narratives of American religion, but it seems unavoidable that this incorporation will contribute to the secular's increasing religionization and pluralization, regardless of whether I endorse the former's transitive reduction or the latter's voluntarism.

As I argued at length in this dissertation's introduction, the opposition of the secular and religious underpins many narratives about American religion, especially the stories told by social scientists, but also those of historians.<sup>582</sup> These binaristic or polarized approaches imagine religiosity on a spectrum from purity to nothingness and adopt a normative, Christian understanding of religion.<sup>583</sup> I have also participated in the production of this binary, and so I will use my own experience as a case study for understanding the challenges of avoiding it. In an article currently under review, Alfredo García and I argue that the increase in the proportion of Americans with no religious affiliation is not in itself

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<sup>581</sup> She was especially frustrated by the course's Nietzschean, perspectivist approach, though we did spend two days reading *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale (New York: Vintage, 1967), 119.

<sup>582</sup> See, for instance, Christian Smith, "Introduction," *The Secular Revolution: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003); Darren Sherkat, *Changing Faith: The Dynamics and Consequences of Americans' Shifting Religious Identities* (New York: New York University Press, 2014); David Hollinger, *After Cloven Tongues of Fire: Protestant Liberalism in Modern American History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013).

<sup>583</sup> See Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). On the category of religion as necessarily Christian, see Jacques Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," trans. Samuel Weber, in *Acts of Religion*, ed. Gil Anidjar (New York: Routledge, 2002), 40-101.

spurring the growth of organized nonbelief.<sup>584</sup> Relying on an original dataset we built that contains the roughly 1,400 nonbeliever groups in the United States,<sup>585</sup> we demonstrate that groups are *not* more likely to appear in counties with more religious “nones.”<sup>586</sup> The sole significant religion-related predictor of the presence and number of nonbeliever organizations in a county is the percentage of evangelicals.<sup>587</sup> We hypothesize two potential causes for this finding: either friction between the groups spurs the formation of local nonbeliever organizations, or there is another unknown factor that encourages both the growth of nonbeliever groups and higher proportions of evangelicals. Given currently available data, we cannot conclude in favor of one hypothesis or the other, but the first hypothesis is consistent with the qualitative findings of other social scientists.

Because the methods of data collection and analysis favored by religious demographers aggregate the many small distinctions required for producing quantitative data, they offer a broad, elegant map, useful for certain ends, but blind to many details. For instance, García and I did not include Unitarian Churches as nonbeliever communities in the dataset we built. Accounting for them is practically impossible, and their exclusion is justifiable and even preferable given the paper’s aims. To determine whether any

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<sup>584</sup> Alfredo García and Joseph Blankholm, “The Social Context of Organized Nonbelief: County-Level Predictors of Nonbeliever Organizations in the United States,” *manuscript under review*, 2015.

<sup>585</sup> We completed the dataset in the fall of 2012.

<sup>586</sup> Cimino and Smith cite a conference presentation that García and I gave in 2013 as evidence of “an estimated 3,109 secularist groups of various types,” (*Atheist Awakening*, 8) but we do not know where they got this number. It is not ours.

<sup>587</sup> The other predictive variable, seemingly unrelated to religion, is the presence of bookstores. Given the number and salience of evangelical bookstores in the United States, we are working on another paper that considers this variable more closely. On evangelical book culture, see Daniel Vaca, “Book People: Evangelical Books and the Making of Contemporary Evangelicalism” (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2012).

particular Unitarian Church should be counted as a community of nonbelievers would require that someone—an authority—visit each church and determine based on consistent criteria whether a sufficient proportion of its members consider themselves nonbelievers of one sort or another. According to Unitarian Universalist Humanists with whom I spoke, most Unitarian Churches that have some nonbelievers will not solely comprise them. In other words, there are communities that contain many organized nonbelievers, but they are not nonbeliever organizations by the criteria we established when constructing our database, i.e., they are not groups founded exclusively for nonbelievers. Unitarian Churches are part of the history of organized nonbelief in the United States, but they pose a practical barrier to their inclusion in a dataset of nonbeliever organizations because we would need to include all or none, and neither decision would capture the population of groups that nonbelievers join to be part of a community with other nonbelievers. Inclusions and exclusions are necessary for constructing *any* database, and they undergird narratives that describe American religion as polarized between the secular and the religious.

Practical, justifiable distinctions repeated again and again have created a picture of American religion in which the secular and the religious are in opposition and the nones are on the rise. What do religious belonging, believing, and behaving look like in a country in which a third of its young people have no religious affiliation and describe themselves using complicated negations like “spiritual but not religious,” “nonreligious,” and “nonbeliever”? Are they secular if they believe and behave religiously but do not belong? Or what if they belong but do not believe or behave? Who gets to decide whether something is secular or religious, and what are the stakes of that decision? Barring the development of a

rhizomatic approach to the quantitative study of American religion, I am uncertain how one crafts stories that rely on these methods without contributing to some form of binaristic reduction. At very least, this dissertation can offer an alternative story that supplements those offered by demographers, quantitative sociologists, and in another context, me. Alfred Korzybski, Jonathan Z. Smith, and Greg, the religious humanist I quote in chapter two, have all reminded us that “the map is not the territory.”<sup>588</sup> Any narrative will darken far more than it illuminates, though each is useful for charting a specific path.

### **Conclusion: Rewriting the *Quixote***

One of the books I have tried to ignore in writing this dissertation is Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*.<sup>589</sup> Perhaps, I thought, if I am indeed the author of this text, and I can delimit my own secular formation, then I will snip that book from my fabric, or in passing, observe the thinness of its thread. My criticisms, in brief, are those of Peter Gordon.<sup>590</sup> The wholeness that Taylor imagines before the epistemic break that produced the buffered self and the immanent frame are narrative fictions without historical support. Dante Alighieri

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<sup>588</sup> Alfred Korzybski, “A Non-Aristotelian System and Its Necessity for Rigour in Mathematics and Physics,” reprinted in *Science and Sanity* (Brooklyn: Institute of General Semantics, 1958), 747-761. Jonathan Z. Smith, “Map is Not Territory,” in *Map is not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 289-309.

<sup>589</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>590</sup> Peter Gordon, “The Place of the Sacred in the Absence of God: Charles Taylor’s *A Secular Age*,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 69:4 (October 2008): 663. Gordon argues that *A Secular Age* is better understood as a work of theology than intellectual history or even philosophy given its methodology and its *a priori* assumption of a lost wholeness that never historically existed. Curiously, Taylor discusses two notions of time in addition to that which he calls “modern;” his notion of lost wholeness closely resembles “the Great Time.” See Taylor, 57.

completed the *Inferno*, for instance, before the immanent frame is supposed to have emerged.<sup>591</sup> On their peregrination through hell, Dante and Virgil encounter a cemetery filled with sepulchers. Inside these tombs are Epicureans, including the father of Dante's friend and mentor, Guido Cavalcanti. In Dante's theology, the Epicureans willed their way to hell by freely choosing an ontology in which the soul dissipates upon death. Their *contrapasso* punishment is to live an eternity confined within their tombs' hot stone, buried alive despite believing in their own finitude.<sup>592</sup>

Dante was banished from Florence because he was on the losing side of a conflict that included the Holy Roman Empire and competing factions within the Catholic Church. Not everyone on the Italian peninsula was enchanted prior to the Reformation, much less all of Western Europe. Christian Smith's criticism of the classic secularization narrative applies equally well to Taylor's revision: "[We] need to depart from secularization theory by descending from broad generalizations about some quixotic religious past."<sup>593</sup> Taylor avoids labeling this past "religious" by arguing that it came before the option to not believe and thus preceded its distinction from the secular. But as Dante tells us, there are thirteenth century Florentines in hell for choosing the wrong ontology.

I nearly escaped from *A Secular Age*, but John Modern placed me aboard the *Pequod*.

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<sup>591</sup> Dante completed the *Comedy* around 1315; Dante Alighieri, "Dante in His Age," *Inferno*, trans. Allan Mandelbaum, with notes by Mandelbaum and Gabriel Marruzzo (New York: Bantam Dell, 1981), 329. Taylor is vague on dates, but his narrative tracks the consequences of the Reformation, so even a generous reading of that movement's direct antecedents would place its start in the fifteenth century (77). In his epilogue, he points to the "realism" of Aquinas and the voluntarism of Scotus and Occam as antecedents (773), but again, in which receding point can we find this lost wholeness?

<sup>592</sup> Dante, 87-93 (Canto X).

<sup>593</sup> Christian Smith, "Introduction," *The Secular Revolution: Rethinking the Secularization of American Public Life* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 18.



Though centered on the year 1851, *Secularism in Antebellum America* can also describe my ethnographic archive. “Evangelical media practices,”<sup>594</sup> Modern argues, played a key role in creating what he calls “evangelical secularism”:

Rather than being the antithesis to religiosity, evangelical secularism was constituted by those feelings, expectations, and practices that animated definitional categories about religion and was manifest in the deployment of those definitions at the level of the population. To frame evangelical media practices in terms of secularism... shifts the analytical emphasis from the meaning-making activities of evangelicals to the question of how evangelicals (and others) were made meaningful to themselves.<sup>595</sup>

Rather than a secular/religious difference, Modern finds their identity. Evangelicals remade how nineteenth-century Americans understood themselves, and they drove the production of secularism and the creation of secular subjects. Like Taylor, Modern sees in the immanent frame a self that is shared, though unlike Taylor’s “buffered” self, which longs for its lost wholeness, Modern’s is porous and haunted by the enchantments that the immanent frame fails to inscribe. In Modern’s appropriation, the immanent frame is bodily and affective *because* it is material and rational. Caught within the secularism of antebellum America, the supernatural is the haunting excess of *logos*.

Modern’s narrative helps us out of an oppositional binary, but in arguing for sameness, it also reproduces debates that nonbelievers have among themselves. In chapter one, I showed how nonbelievers who want to purify the secular of religious pollution figure themselves waging a battle with conservative religion and especially evangelicals. Chapters one and three showed that organizations like American Atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation assume a sharp distinction between secular and religious. These

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<sup>594</sup> Modern, *Secularism*, location 1143.

<sup>595</sup> *Ibid.*, 1155-1160

groups' ultimate goal is to eliminate the specialness of religion by producing a sameness in which everyone, including the state, is secular. Demographers have reproduced this same binaristic opposition by writing narratives that oppose religious and secular and associate the religious "nones" with secularity. The "nones" are a specter that haunts the secular/religious binary. It looms and grows, and its heterogeneity defies inscription. All of these narratives are haunted by categorical excess, just as the dataset that García and I built is haunted by nontheistic Unitarian Universalists.

But chapter three also showed that the American Humanist Association sometimes identifies as religious and sometimes as secular, depending on the context. It narrates itself ambiguously, as religious humanists always have. The Council for Secular Humanism and eventually the Center for Inquiry grew out of evangelicals' attempts to attack secular humanism by making it a religion. Secular humanists broke with their religious past by calling other humanists religious and themselves secular, reproducing the sameness asserted by evangelicals through an assertion of their own difference. Attempts to elide the secular/religious distinction and produce sameness are no less common among organized nonbelievers than attempts to establish it.

Of course, Modern's secularism produces a sameness that runs deeper than the elision of names like secular/religious by describing an environment that conditions subjects. And yet, this is still a description. As Michael Warner and Leigh Schmidt both wonder in their respective reviews of *Secularism in Antebellum America*, why does Modern

reach for the term “secularism” to describe the formation he identifies?<sup>596</sup> Rather than evangelical secularism, could a third term suffice that produces not identification, but an underlying antecedent—a third cause that is different from both? By telling these stories of sameness and difference, what kind of secular formations are we, as scholars, producing? What do our narratives allow us to see, and what do they occlude? The archive that Modern presents observes a similarity in the evangelical/secular that helps us understand the sameness of both groups today. It also occludes the Secularism of Holyoake, which took root in the United States in the years following the Civil War and influenced a range of groups and movements.<sup>597</sup>

The landscape of nonbeliever organizations provides an alternative to models that frame American religion as sameness or difference. The competition among these groups, their disagreements over how to be secular, and the very different legal strategies they adopt are in many ways products of the eras in which each organization was founded. Prevailing understandings of the secular/religious boundary change over time, from the nineteenth century, to the interwar period, to the Cold War, and into the present. The Ethical Culture movement, for instance, was founded in the 1870s, when the term “freethinker” included spiritualists as well as atheists. Members today retain a porous understanding of the religious and the secular. They are mostly nontheistic religious humanists, and they say and do things that seem very odd to those who expect the secular

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<sup>596</sup> Michael Warner, “Was Antebellum America Secular?” *Immanent Frame*, October 2, 2012, available at <http://blogs.ssrc.org/tif/2012/10/02/was-antebellum-america-secular/>, accessed April 3, 2015. Leigh Schmidt, “Review: *Secularism in Antebellum America*,” *Church History* 82:1 (2013): 230-32.

<sup>597</sup> To be clear, Modern recognizes the presence of Holyoake, though he does not play a role in his narrative. See Modern, *Secularism*, locations 4600-4611.

to be pure of religious pollution.

The American Humanist Association was founded in 1941, just before WWII, and it used to be more like the Ethical Culture movement, but for reasons that I explain in chapter two, the organization has transformed in the intervening decades. It carries a trace of that older, more promiscuous understanding, but it has become ambivalent toward religion. Organizations like American Atheists and the Freedom From Religion Foundation were founded in a period of high separation, which corresponds roughly to the Cold War and begins around 1947, when *Everson v. Board of Education* inaugurated the Supreme Court's decades-long concern with the separation of church and state.<sup>598</sup> Over the past few years, groups like the Humanist Community at Harvard and the London-based Sunday Assembly have engaged in humanist and atheist congregation planting in the United States and around the world. These groups are embracing new forms of hybridity that are also evident among Emerging evangelicals.<sup>599</sup> Present-day fights among nonbeliever organizations over how to be secular are products of the historical transformation of the boundary between secular and religious. They are plural, contradictory legacies that do not supersede one another, but continue to exist in conflict.<sup>600</sup> Scholars draw upon these secular formations as readily as organized nonbelievers do. Some find religion everywhere, while others rewrite

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<sup>598</sup> *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1 (1947).

<sup>599</sup> See Susan Harding, "Revolve, The Biblezine: A Transevanglical Text," in *The Social Life of Scriptures: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Biblicism*, ed. James S. Bielo (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2009), 176–93. Also see James S. Bielo, "FORMED" Emerging Evangelicals Navigate Two Transformations," in *The New Evangelical Social Engagement*, ed. Brian Steensland and Philip Goff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 31-47; James S. Bielo, *Emerging Evangelicals: Faith, Modernity, and the Desire for Authenticity* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

<sup>600</sup> This is the central argument I would like to develop in the manuscript version of this dissertation.

secularization or turn it on its head. In concert with other actors like the courts and lawmakers, we all participate in making the American secular.

The search for what things truly are is quixotic, but this adjective fails to appreciate the *Quixote*. Cervantes' novel tells the story of a Spanish gentleman of modest means who leaves his farm, his housekeeper, and his niece, and wanders through the countryside of Spain acting out scenes from chivalric novels and insisting he is a knight-errant of great renown. Don Quixote often uses the point of his lance to entangle others in his fictions, though he and his squire, Sancho, also receive several beatings that nearly kill them. In a typical encounter, while traveling on a rural road, Don Quixote sees a barber wearing a shiny new basin atop his head to cover it from the rain. Narrating the basin as the legendary helmet of Mambrino and the barber as a knight, Quixote attacks the man, who flees on foot and leaves the basin in the road. Admitting that the helmet now appears as a basin, Quixote tells Sancho that someone must have failed to recognize it and melted down the other half for its gold. "Be that as it may," he insists, "I recognize it, and its transmutation does not matter to me."<sup>601</sup>

Near the end of the novel, Don Quixote, Sancho, and many of the book's other characters encounter one another at a rural inn. In a climactic scene, the barber also arrives, and he immediately accuses Don Quixote of stealing his basin (and Sancho of stealing his donkey). At stake is not only whether the helmet is a basin, but also whether Quixote is a noble knight or a common thief. Because he has endeared himself to the others

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<sup>601</sup> Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quixote*, trans. Edith Grossman (New York: HarperCollins: 2003), 155.

at the inn, the reality of the “basihelm,” as Sancho calls it, is far from clear.<sup>602</sup> Exasperated, the barber asks aloud, “Is it possible that so many honorable people are saying that this is not a basin but a helmet?” In the ensuing debate, a priest defers to Don Quixote’s judgment, and a wealthy nobleman sides with him for sport. The barber’s basin, the narrator tells the reader, “had been transformed into the helmet of Mambrino before [the barber’s] very eyes.”<sup>603</sup> In the end, members of the Holy Brotherhood—officers of the law—mediated the dispute. They authorized the basin as a helmet, which Don Quixote kept, and the priest paid the barber in secret to settle Quixote’s debt. The reality of the basin/helmet was not only a question of perspective, but also of authority.

Throughout this dissertation, I have argued for the contingency of the secular/religious boundary. I have attended closely to the actors and means of its ongoing construction, and I have identified arenas of authority like Congress and the courts in which the secular formations produced by nonbeliever groups become authorized and reach far beyond their communities. I have also couched nonbelievers’ imagination of the secular in a diverse array of influences that help explain their contemporary conflicts over how to be secular and avoid religious pollution. Inasmuch as scholars are authors of the secular, we, too, authorize particular formations and enable their proliferation. The *Quixote* has an author, Miguel de Cervantes, but it is a book about being authored. Its characters, its layered narrators, and even Cervantes’ other books are all within its field. There is an outside of the *Quixote*, but *il n’y a pas de hors-texte*. The same is true of the secular’s scholarly production. No amount of paranoia can free me from this discursive coil.

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<sup>602</sup> Ibid., 390.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid., 393.

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