

# Secular humanism and atheism beyond progressive secularism

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"Freethinkers," including both atheists and secular humanists, have always been a minority in American society--and not a very popular one. There are still laws in several states preventing non-theists from holding office. Just as evangelical Protestants up until one hundred years ago held a largely optimistic view of the future and the end times (known as postmillennialism), secular humanists and atheists also expected that a progressive, secular "kingdom" would emerge as societies threw off a primitive theistic mindset and matured into educated adulthood. As historian Sidney Warren (1966:231) writes of these movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: "Freethinkers never doubted the correctness of their position, for they viewed history as a continuous struggle between the forces of light and darkness. They were, they felt, carrying the torch of reason in an otherwise religious world of bigotry and superstition." As secular rationalism gained ascendancy in many American institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the expectation of a comprehensive secular revolution was widely shared by organized humanist and atheist leaders and thinkers, as well as by scientists and educational leaders (Smith 2003). Secularism, understood as the dominance of naturalistic and scientific thought over supernatural explanations of reality, was seen as the future for America. We call this view "progressive secularism."

That widespread secularism has not been established in the United States, and that such a scenario for the future is now questioned by many social scientists (Berger 1999; Stark and Finke 2000), has become major concerns for freethought movements. Yet there is a far from monolithic response among freethinkers to the resurgence of religion in America. Some leaders have repudiated their earlier optimism about the future dominance of secularism, while others have held onto this optimistic vision, believing that the United States will eventually follow Europe into a more secular mode of living. Although not part of the organized atheist or secular humanist movements, the triumphant--if also embattled and contentious--tone is still evident in recent popular atheist attacks against religion (Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris 2006; Hitchens 2007). Most participants in the movement acknowledge the difficulty of being an atheist or secular humanist in American society, but nonetheless maintain a hope that secularism will eventually triumph. In this article, we argue that the question of how secularism can survive and even thrive in a religious society has become pressing for atheists and secular humanists, resulting in significant changes in their strategy and self-understanding.

## SECULAR HUMANISM AND ATHEISM PAST AND PRESENT

Although contemporary secular humanism in the United States has its roots in religious humanism, it has gradually disassociated itself from any religious connotations and ties with organized religion. The religious roots of humanism can be found in Unitarian and Universalist ideals, which emerged after a segment of Congregational churches in the eighteenth century

rejected such key Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the teaching that God can condemn people to hell. Unitarian-Universalism grew increasingly liberal in later periods as it questioned other traditional beliefs, including theism. In 1933, the Humanist Manifesto was issued largely by Unitarians, calling for a world community based on secular and liberal values. The fledgling movement based around this manifesto was called "religious humanism" (Walter 1998).

Although the use of the term "religious" was meant to stress experiences and activities which are humanly significant, while excluding any supernatural beliefs and explanations of reality, some religious humanist leaders and participants objected to any uses of religion. Thus, in an effort to emphasize its secular dimension, the authors of the Humanist Manifesto II (1973) removed any reference to religious humanism. In fact, the document asserted that while some humanists may prefer the religious label, such redefinitions of religion "often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms." The question of whether to use a religious or secular framework was the main factor in a schism within the primary humanist group, the American Humanist Association (AHA), in the late 1970s. The conflict resulted in the birth of the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism in 1980, later renamed the Council for Secular Humanism. Thus, while religious humanists claim that humanism is a non-theistic religion, secular humanists define their movement as a strictly secular philosophy and value system and eschew any religious language.

In its twenty-five years of existence, the Council has attempted to change the face of the freethought movement in the United States. The more traditional strategy of organizing freethinkers into congregations and local societies (in some cases holding church-like services) was seen as a dismal failure in expanding and recruiting for the movement. Instead, the Council has stressed international outreach to elites, particularly targeting opinion leaders and the media and entertainment worlds. The Council's sole original goal of publishing its magazine, *Free Inquiry*, was broadened to include the creation of a greater sense of community among secular humanists and extending its message to other secular and skeptical Americans seeking support and resources. During the 1990s, specialized humanist groups were formed, such as African-Americans for Humanism and Secular Organizations for Sobriety (which serves as a non-theist alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous and other addiction programs).

In 1996, the Council founded the Campus Freethought Alliance, now called the Center for Inquiry on Campus (CFIC), which has shown fairly rapid growth, enlisting students and faculty in over 142 universities and colleges around the country. Student freethought groups have formed in the Bible Belt, giving atheist and secular humanist students a support system in the face of overwhelming conservative Christian involvement on campus. Debates and even cooperation on joint programs are held with Christian groups on these campuses. CFIC has also sprouted up in less expected places, such as Ivy League schools, where the intellectual trends like postmodernism have galvanized secular humanist students who criticize what they see as the decreasing emphasis on reason in academia. The focus on outreach can also be seen in the formation of Centers for Inquiry (CFI), which are educational and outreach centers that coordinate secular humanist and skeptical activity in a given region. CFIs in New York and Los Angeles, for instance, target the media and entertainment worlds with a secular humanist message. There are a reported 15 Centers for Inquiry throughout the world, and 876 groups affiliated with the centers (including approximately 120 local secular humanist groups in the United States).

Distinct from the secular humanist movement just described, organized atheist groups trace their roots to the many anti-religious societies in American history. The largest group is the American Atheists organization, which has approximately 2,000 members. In recent years, several other atheist groups and websites have been founded. Although smaller in number than secular humanists, organized atheists have been among the strongest activists for non-theism, often challenging religious actions and groups in court. Humanists often contrast their positive system of ethics and values (such as creating a world community and defending human rights) with the more reactionary and hard-line stance atheists take in is defending and promoting non-theism. Atheists claim that secular humanists have diluted the anti-theistic message by adding philosophical and ethical teachings to their agenda. Throughout this article, therefore, we refer to secular humanism and atheism as separate though related movements, with the term freethinkers encompassing both. (1)

## THE SOCIOLOGY OF ATHEISM AND SECULAR HUMANISM

Despite the long history and these recent developments among freethinkers, there has been little research on the organizational aspects of atheism and secular humanism in the United States, aside from treatments of the controversial figure Madelyn Murray O'Hare (Le Beau 2003). In the 1970s, there were sociological studies of humanist movements, especially focusing on the United Kingdom where they have had a stronger base of support (Budd 1977; Campbell 1972). Recent attention has been paid to the historical roots of freethought in the United States, with an attempt to update the situation to the contemporary period and expand the concept of freethought to include religious liberals and nonconformists (Jacoby 2004). There has also been some new survey research on non-theists, with one prominent study finding weak social ties among atheists as compared to religious believers (Bainbridge 2005). The most important recent research, both for scholars studying these movements and for secular humanists and atheists themselves, has been the American Religious Identification Survey (Keysar, et al. 2003). Although its implications are contested, this study found an increase in Americans claiming no religion from seven percent in 1990 to fourteen percent in 2001. Although the increase has been hailed by atheists and secular humanists as a victory for secularism, the situation is far more complex and begs further study.

Stark and Finke's (2000:209) religious economies theory holds that a persistent minority in society will reject organized religion, but that this segment of non-believers may be too small and weak to create a distinct niche for secularism. Under what conditions, though, might that niche develop? Christian Smith's (1998) subcultural identity theory holds that maintaining a tension with society can strengthen the particular beliefs and practices of a group, regardless of its size. In fact, as with the evangelicals Smith studied, secular humanists and atheists have assumed a position in America society that stresses maintaining boundaries and reinforcing group identity in the face of a larger external threat. That is, like evangelicals, secular humanists and atheists feel "embattled" by a persistently religious society. Whether they are "thriving" as a consequence is an open question which we address in part in this study. If they are thriving, it may be possible for them to establish a specific niche as a secular alternative in the religious marketplace Stark and Finke allude to.

This article argues that the actions and interactions of atheist and secular humanist groups and leaders--even among those holding to a strongly secularist view of the future--reveal how they have internalized both their minority status and the failure of progressive secularism in the United States. This is evident in the three strategies they pursue in their attempts to survive and grow in a largely religious society. First, they are competing and repositioning themselves to attract "secular seekers," who are similar to spiritual seekers or "questers" in their persistent search for authentic communities of meaning while remaining highly individualistic (Roof 1999). Second, they have borrowed elements from their main antagonists, evangelical Protestants, in defining themselves and rallying others to their cause. Third, they have taken up minority discourse and identity politics in pressing for group rights and equal treatment in society.

## METHODS

This article examines recent developments in atheist and secular humanist organizations through interviews with members of these groups, participant observation of atheist and secular humanist meetings and gatherings, and content analysis of *Free Inquiry*, the bimonthly magazine of the Council for Secular Humanism. Thirty-seven interviews with participants and leaders of secular humanist and atheist organizations were conducted between September 2002 and February 2006. Of these, fifteen interviews were conducted in the New York metropolitan area and twelve in Tulsa, Oklahoma. These interviews were each approximately an hour in length. Ten of the interviews were shorter in length as they were conducted with participants in the Godless Americans March on Washington in November 2002. The 37 interviewees ranged in age from 20 and 80 and a quarter were women. All of the informants were white and the majority of those asked about their educational level had attended college. (2)

We recruited the non-march informants by attending secular humanist and atheist meetings and making public and private requests for participants in the study. Leaders of these groups were informed of our objectives and they sometimes referred us to participants. It could be the case that these informants were "hand-picked" by leaders to represent the group, though judging by informants' accounts, they were not the most active or committed to their particular organization or movement. The interviews in the New York area were recorded by hand and those in Tulsa were tape recorded. The interviews covered freethinkers' life histories, including their religious backgrounds and training (or lack thereof), the events leading to their espousal of atheist and secular humanist teachings and philosophy, and their involvement in the organized expressions of these movements. Additional questions focused on changes in lifestyles and attitudes since participating in secular humanist/atheist organizations, as well as the respondents' views on issues having to do with the "culture wars," such as abortion, church-state separation, gay rights, and euthanasia. Finally, respondents were asked about their status in society, such as whether they felt like minorities in their work and social lives, and how they viewed the future role of religion and secularism in American society.

Participant observation was carried out from 2002 to 2004 in New York, New Jersey, and Oklahoma at ten meetings of groups affiliated with the American Humanist Association, the Center for Inquiry, American Atheists, and African-American Humanists. Additional participant observation was conducted at the Godless Americans March on Washington in 2002.

Content analysis of the Council for Secular Humanism's magazine, *Free Inquiry*, covered the period from the magazine's founding in 1980 to 2005. Every issue of the magazine was examined according to the criteria stated above for the interviews, as well as posing the central question of this study: how do secular humanists respond to the failure of secularism to take hold in the United States?

## SECULARIST SURVIVAL STRATEGIES BEYOND THE PROGRESSIVE SECULARISM PARADIGM

Optimism about the eventual victory of secularism has historically been the rule rather than the exception in organized freethought movements. Philosopher Corliss Lamont (1990), often considered the father of modern secular humanism, fully expected that organized religion would continue to decline into irrelevance and obscurity late in the twentieth century. The aforementioned Humanist Manifesto of 1933 and the Humanist Manifesto II of 1973--considered to be the charters of the organized humanist movement in the United States--both viewed secularism as ascending. Humanist Manifesto II predicted that the twenty-first century would be the "humanist century," as new strides in morals, ethics, and technology replaced older religious systems. Such changes as greater availability of birth control, abortion, and divorce were thought to signal a social revolution that would overturn religious values. Certainty about the eventual progress of secularism is still asserted by some freethought leaders. As Ellen Johnson, president of American Atheists, said during an interview: "Religion is on the wane. That's why there is government support [for it]. That's why it's going to the schools ... and to Capitol Hill. Today religion is being bailed out by the government. That's why religion is equated with patriotism."

Less optimistically, the drafters of an updated Humanist Manifesto 2000 stated that "the world is now divided, as fundamentalisms have rekindled, contesting the principles of humanism and secularism and demanding a return to the religiosity of a premodern era." There is clearly a loss of confidence among secular humanist leaders regarding the victory of secularism, at least in American society. This is apparent in recent issues of *Free Inquiry*. For example, the summer 2002 issue, headlined "Anywhere but Here," bemoans how the United States stands as an exception to the way "the developed world is becoming more secular." Acknowledging the attraction of religions, Paul Kurtz, the leader and founder of the Council for Secular Humanism, suggests that they "will continue with us in the foreseeable future and will not easily wither away," since, for the "bulk of humankind," religion presents "moral poetry, aesthetic inspiration, reformative ceremonial rituals, which act out and dramatize the human condition and ... seek to slake the thirst for meaning and purpose" (Kurtz 2002).

Among participants in the secular humanist movement, we found many who viewed themselves as an embattled minority with an uncertain future in religious America. Alan, a thirty-five-year-old secular humanist interviewed in Tulsa, neatly summed up this line of thought: "Don't you know Oral Roberts is over here [by] one mile? So, we are talking in the shadow of the prayer tower.... I think there will always be a small group of people, like us, who will be critical thinkers and who will reject the dogma that's handed to us from the time we are children. I think the masses will continue [in religion]." In New York, there was the same positioning with regard to the religious drift of the greater society. Barbara, a seventy-year-old member of a Long Island secular humanist group, said she has given up hope of convincing "those who believe the whole

kit and caboodle of religion. You really can't argue with them. We have [to realize] we live in a theistic world."

In the balance of this article, we explore the strategies employed by secular humanists to negotiate a world that seems to be beyond progressive secularism. We show how they have responded to the failure of secularism to become a dominant force in the United States and how they have rethought their role and strategy from that of acting as the secular vanguard to assuming a subcultural identity and engaging in defensive competition in order to create a secularist market niche in American society and the American religious economy. They have done so by adopting three strategies: (1) creating a niche for secular humanism among the unchurched and "secular seekers"; (2) mimicking and adapting various aspects of evangelicalism, even as they target this movement as their main antagonist; and (3) making use of minority discourse and identity politics.

### Strategy 1: Secular Seeking and Competition

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

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

Jonathan, a forty-seven-year-old musician and real estate broker in New York, was brought up in a nominally Jewish home, but never considered himself to be religious. When he got married, he

tried attending a Reform Jewish temple with his wife, a Catholic. "My wife wanted to have some religion and she didn't care what it was. Judaism seemed less problematic. It's less of a faith-based perspective, less about being redeemed and all that other stuff." They went through classes at the synagogue, but he grew dissatisfied. "Even that disgusted me. There was no way I could do it. I'd be a hypocrite. I think everyone believed it because they [thought] everyone else was believing it." But with the birth of his daughter, Jonathan realized that he needed a "community that represents something I believe in." By that time he had developed a non-judgmental belief system based on his idea that, owing to genetics, people do not have free will, are not responsible for their actions, and that it is therefore impossible to judge others. Through the Internet he still was looking for some group or community in which to raise his child. Although secular humanism carried a strong belief in free will, he found this belief system closest to his own and began to participate in secular humanist activities in the New York area.

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

Still, a growing trend toward Christian or alternative forms of spirituality and away from non-theism in Unitarian-Universalism has tended to alienate secular humanists from what was once their strongest ally (Dart 2001). Roger, a sixty-five-year-old teacher, followed a familiar path of secular seeking. Raised Catholic, he adopted an atheist stance through reading philosophy, including the works of Ayn Rand. He was introduced to Ethical Culture and then moved on to Unitarianism. Since then, as Unitarians have moved to more religious and spiritual teachings, he has distanced himself from the church, joining the American Humanist Association (AHA) and becoming a "chaplain" with that group. As a chaplain, he organizes discussions, does counseling, and participates in interfaith events representing the AHA. Roger values his involvement in the secular humanist group for providing a sense of community. "I love going to a place where I can speak my mind, where I can say I'm an atheist easily." He still seeks an alliance with the humanist wing of Unitarian-Universalism (the church has humanist, Christian, pagan, and other associations within its structure). To his distress, he finds that younger, more religious members of the AHA are using the language of spirituality. The few attempts to create a coalition between these various groups of freethinkers have failed. He sees more promise in promoting ties with liberal religious groups to fight the influence of the religious right.

Secular humanist competition with other freethought groups is evident in its claim that it represents the largest and fastest growing segment of the broader movement. The Council for Secular Humanism's outreach strategy has shown a measure of success. Its magazine *Free Inquiry* has 25,000 subscribers and *Skeptical Inquirer* has 35,000 subscribers, according to its government-required circulation statements, a higher circulation figure than any other freethought publication. There is likely some readership overlap between the two magazines, particularly since the *Skeptical Inquirer* has recently moved beyond debunking paranormal phenomena to include critical treatment of new and traditional religions. The competitive thrust is evident in the way Council officials repeatedly refuse to disclose associate membership figures and instead often cite a much higher 100,000 circulation for *Free Inquiry* and the *Skeptical Inquirer* as the most accurate indicator of its strength. The readership estimates of magazines are admittedly a weak measure of the vitality of a social movement, but the Council admits that its aim is more to influence and educate the public rather than build a closely-knit membership.

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

The future prospects for organized atheism and secular humanism in drawing seekers may also be limited by competition from postmodern philosophy and criticism. *Free Inquiry* magazine has particularly targeted postmodernism (while continuing to criticize traditional religion and occultism) since the 1990s for eclipsing the importance of reason, objective truth, and science. The Center for Inquiry on Campus was founded in part because of concern for the fact that postmodern philosophy and relativism has wide appeal in academia and thus the potential to influence the current generation of American students. Postmodernism is equally problematic for the religious and secular alike, since postmodern philosophy involves not only a critique of the religious narrative but also of the secular, i.e., of the scientific, rational, or anti-religious narrative (Davie 2004). Postmodernism and freethought rationalism are, in a sense, in competition for domination of secular American mentalities (Levitt 2001).

## Strategy 2: The Evangelicalization of Secular Humanism and Atheism

Evangelicals envision the contentious and disunited coalition of secular humanists and atheists as their main enemy. In response to such targeting, and along with a loss of faith in the inevitable



triumph of their position, many secular humanists and atheists have borrowed evangelical concepts and strategies to maintain and grow their numbers (Sandler 2006).

The attempt by some secularists to revive and galvanize their own ranks through the adoption of their perceived opponents' strategies is not new. Indeed, this is evident on a linguistic level in the very term, "secular humanist." Rather than resisting the label "secular humanist" because it was used by evangelicals as a critique of secular culture, Paul Kurtz appropriated and embraced it. In doing so, he tried to shift evangelicals' pejorative use of the label to a positive, defiant form of self-identification. (3) Evangelical leader Tim LaHaye, who first described "secular humanism" as an amorphous but conspiratorial movement, would eventually target Kurtz and the Council for Secular Humanism as the main architects and proponents of secular humanism (LaHaye 1984; LaHaye and Noebel 2000).

The evangelical claim that secular humanism is actually a religion most vividly suggests how the opposition has helped to define the movement. Evangelical critics claim that secular humanism defends a clearly defined worldview where humanity, reason, and science are worshipped instead of God. They support this charge with a 1961 U.S. Supreme Court decision defining humanism as a religion, arguing that if secular humanism is a religion it should not have a privileged place in public schools or in the public square in general. This argument has infuriated Kurtz and his organization, as they insist that secular humanism is only a philosophy built on reason and science, and gives no place to any supernatural or "transnatural" reality. This insistence on making a distinction between secular humanism and religion has revived old conflicts within the humanist family. The issue of whether humanism is a religion has become particularly prominent in *Free Inquiry*, occupying an increasing number of pages. The sharpest response yet to the controversy was in the Fall 2002 issue, its cover emblazoned with the headline, "Drawing Clear Boundaries: Secular and Religious Humanism." Throughout the issue, religious humanists are taken to task for their semantic and conceptual errors in using the term "religious" and are even accused of cowardice for hiding behind religious terminology "in order to be socially acceptable" by their disassociation from atheists. The fact that some religious humanists, such as segments of the Unitarians and some younger members of the AHA, are using concepts such as spirituality is doubly troublesome for the secular humanists. But most importantly for secular humanists, the religious humanist, "simply by existing, gives aid and comfort to the prayer warriors," according to *Free Inquiry* Editor Tom Flynn. Indeed, LaHaye and other evangelicals cite religious humanist writings as proof that secular humanism is a religion (Flynn 2002:41).

Evangelical Christians has also shaped secular humanism in providing an impetus for formally uncommitted secular people to become involved in secular humanist and atheist organizations. In our interviews we found that the transition from being an inactive or "nominal" secular individual to becoming involved in secular humanist groups and activism was often instigated by contact and growing concern with individuals and issues associated with the religious right. We found this tendency in interviews conducted in New York, as well as in much more evangelically-oriented Tulsa, Oklahoma. As Phyllis, a fifty-three-year-old New York educator and former leftist activist, said, "I didn't know much about the religious right until I had to work with them. I started seeing what they were about and became very frightened at the rhetoric. I realized the Board of Education in New York is permeated with born-again Christians. The rhetoric was borderline fascist, with attacks on single mothers. I was harassed on the job when

[they found out I was an atheist]. It was openly racist and it was coming from black and Hispanic people. But the left wasn't serious about the born-again threat. The threat to the First Amendment was a non-issue for them. I always knew I was an atheist but never saw the need to talk about it until I saw how [these] people were threatening freedom."

The way in which secular humanists and atheists portray their position in society parallels patterns in Smith's (1998) study of American evangelicals. Smith found that the tensions and unease that evangelicals experience as they interact in the greater American society enhance the vitality of their religious identity. Oppositional relations and interactions between different groups create and sustain a variety of subcultural identities in a pluralistic society. Perceiving and portraying the group as a besieged minority may not strengthen group identity as effectively for secularists as for evangelicals, but the growth of secularist activity and organizations in the last two decades does suggest that increased tensions and oppositions between groups has had a tonic effect on secularist identity.

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

### Strategy 3: Secular Humanist and Atheist Identity Politics

In November of 2002, secular humanists joined with other freethought groups in a Godless Americans March on Washington, co-sponsored by American Atheists and the Council for Secular Humanism, in order to press for non-discrimination and equal rights for nonbelievers in America. The fact that atheists by law cannot be elected to public office in several states and by public opinion could not be elected to the presidency of the United States was the primary sign of such discrimination to the participants at the march. The march featured passionate speeches on the need to grant equal rights to atheists and other freethinkers, as well as "testimonies" from soldiers, politicians, and others describing the hardships of being an atheist in their line of work. The marchers held aloft signs proclaiming freethinker slogans, such as "TEACH SCIENCE, NOT SUPERSTITION," as well as ones mocking organized religion, including "9/11 WAS A FAITH-BASED INITIATIVE!" Satire, often in song, and comedy routines generated the greatest enthusiasm among the crowd of 2,500. A comedian known as "Pastor Deacon Fred" created a stir with a ribald impersonation of a Baptist preacher (often with his audience responding with "Amen") that quickly turned to mocking Christ, the Bible, and various Christian beliefs. As he recited a litany of scandals and controversial issues, from priests sexually abusing altar boys to creationism to the faith of John Ashcroft, he led the crowd in enthusiastically chanting: "You don't need facts when you have Jesus!" The performance ignited an angry reaction among

evangelical and fundamentalist protesters who tried to drown it out with whistles and bullhorns. The police had to intervene, as they moved the protesters away from the gathering to the far end of the Washington Mall.

When the marchers had first assembled at the destination point to hear the speakers and presentations, there was little camaraderie or even conversation between individuals as they remained in the small cliques in which they had marched. But the speeches, music, and especially the comedy, not to mention the confrontations with Christian protesters, managed to meld these independent freethinkers into something of a convivial community. These freethinkers, who within their particular meetings and groups often engage in open and critical debate among and about themselves and their own diverse identities and interests, publicly came together and took their respective and collective interests and identities for granted. In this way, they put on a unified public front (or performance) against what they perceived as a common enemy. Despite different opinions, agendas, identities, and interests, these freethinkers found a common rallying point, not within but against. The Christian protestors became the "attentive glue" (any public requiring another public to watch it) that held them all together (Dayan 2005).

To a casual observer, the tweaking and provocation of religious America at the march might seem to be the least effective strategy for atheists to gain political or cultural acceptance among the majority of believing Americans. Such seemingly counterproductive behavior may reveal the tensions between the older atheist belief in inevitable secularization and the more recent realization that freethinkers must learn to survive in a religious society. Aside from the local atheist and secular humanist meetings, there are few venues in which freethinkers can vent their frustrations and sense of alienation from society for their controversial beliefs. Almost every secular humanist and atheist meeting we attended began with a session devoted to poking fun at the foibles of religious groups and people, or with a performance of music satirizing religious themes. In her study of British secular humanists, Susan Budd (1977:266) found that the condemnation of religion in these groups can "act as a protective ideology, since it becomes a defining characteristic of the movement and a method of uniting otherwise dissident opinions." But such protective mechanisms may also prevent the emergence of a consensus of thought or feeling, a problem that religions escape with their focus on transcendent ideals that stand outside or above specific issues and politics.

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

Sarcastic attacks on religion also reveal the tensions existing between freethought as what Castells (1997:8) calls a resistance identity--i.e., an oppositional identity adopted by those "that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination"--and as a project identity--assumed "when social actors, on the basis of whichever cultural materials are available to them, build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of [the] overall social structure." Whereas the former is firmly entrenched as a subcultural identity, we might say that the latter is a subculture looking to challenge such a status on the basis of that very status. Where a resistance identity confines itself to "building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to" society (Castells 1997:8), a project identity moves out of the trenches in order to challenge such an identity. The subcultural identity of freethinkers is expressed in their claim they are an embattled minority in need of rights and even protection in a religious and hostile society, tacitly acknowledging the failure of widespread secularism.

In *Free Inquiry* magazine, as well as in our interviews, there was frequent use of language expressing a minority identity and status, often taken from minority and identity politics. The call for atheists and secular humanists to engage in greater activism to protect their rights is often compared to the women's rights and gay rights movements. It is fairly common to hear or read of those describing their declaration of themselves as atheist or secular humanist as an act of "coming out of the closet" (Kurtz 2000; Silverman 2003). This was illustrated in an interview with Paul, a fifty-six-year-old businessman in the Washington, D.C area, during the Godless March on Washington. For Paul, the process of "coming out" as an atheist was gradual. He was raised in a conservative Lutheran home. "The first step is realizing that you don't believe what everyone else believes. Then this little voice in your head [starts] saying that you're going to hell.... The [next] step is saying, 'I'm an atheist,' and then saying, 'I'm an atheist and proud of it.' That's the more difficult step." In his own personal life, he said, "it's traumatic to be surrounded by a community that is hostile to you. It's not politically correct to disrespect blacks, gays or the handicapped, but it's still all right to disrespect atheists.... Religious people are usually the extremists and they represent a much larger group. But they consider us not to be fully human. One of the things that rules your life when you're an atheist is fear. You never know when you're going to be attacked."

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

In the freethought movement's meetings and publications there is much debate about what name might make for a more positive self-image among Americans than atheist or secular humanist. There has been some media attention to the effort among one group of atheists to substitute "brights" for the older terms, but little agreement in practice on actually adopting that term (Shermer 2003). Scientist and secular humanist Richard Dawkins argues that adopting the name "brights" and forsaking the older designations would be an exercise in consciousness-raising (Dawkins 2003). Replacing derogatory terms of the past with more positive ones is a tactic frequently employed by many once-stigmatized minority groups seeking to gain a place for themselves in American society, from African-Americans to gay rights activists. One could even call such a move a standard strategy of contemporary identity politics. As Grant Farred (2000:638) writes, "The struggle for identity has often turned on the capacity of marginalized groups to set their own political agenda, simultaneously acknowledge, reject, and reinscribe the disjuncture between 'identities imposed' and those desired." One goal of identity politics therefore is "the re-creation of minority histories in a public sphere that had long been hostile or indifferent to narratives of that self and community" (Farred 2000:638). To this end, "identities that start as resistance may induce projects, and may also, along the course of history, become dominant in the institutions of society, thus becoming legitimizing identities to rationalize their domination" (Castells 1997:8).

It should also be noted, however, that a smaller segment of secular humanists and atheists oppose the recent trend of using the language of minority politics to describe their relation to American society. This point is stressed in a Free Inquiry article by D. J. Grothe and Austin Dacey (2004) entitled "Atheism is not a Civil Rights Issue":

Civil rights struggles are related to a more general approach to social action known as "identity politics." In identity politics, people organize around their shared identity rather than their party affiliation or political ideology. This is quite appropriate for groups whose collective, historical experience of oppression has forged some substantial unity in belief and social agenda. Yet atheists have no beliefs in common but their disbelief. Imagine a voting bloc that would back a candidate merely for lacking faith in a personal deity.

The authors clearly see atheism as a matter of public awareness and education, or consciousness-raising, rather than of civil rights.

## CONCLUSION

The expansion of freethought and secular humanist organizations, publications, and websites in recent years suggests that they may be filling a niche vacated by religious humanists, Unitarians, and other liberal religious groups that have taken a greater interest in spirituality. The percentage of atheists and freethinkers remains relatively constant, though their numbers may be rising. It can be argued that there is a "demand" for secular humanism among a small minority of Americans, even if the "supply" for such individualistic consumers would obviously be less stable and rigorous (or strict) than that found among religious niches (Stark and Finke 2000). Competition, whether among the various non-theist groups, or between a secular group and a religious organization (such as Unitarian-Universalism), has encouraged innovations and

organization-building, as can be seen in the formation of secular humanist self-help and relief groups. The modest degree of tension between organized secular humanism and atheism and the wider society likewise increases commitment to the non-theist cause, even if the individualism and weak social ties of participants mitigate against forming strong community ties and loyalty (Bainbridge 2005).

In its recent history, secular humanism has reasserted its identity and strengthened its boundaries by differentiating itself from religious humanism, Unitarian-Universalism, and secular postmodernism on the one hand, and atheism, on the other. At the same time, because both secular humanism and atheism draw on a very small market share, these movements have attempted to broaden the secular niche to include agnostics, experimented with the use of rituals and rites of passage, and built coalitions with liberal religious groups on various social issues. Their adoption of both the subcultural style of evangelicals and identity politics allows secular humanists and atheists to press for greater acceptance in American society while maintaining a vital subculture.

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

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Richard Cimino

Christopher Smith

New School for Social Research

\*Direct correspondence to: Richard Cimino, 2869 Lawrence Dr., Wantagh, NY 11793 (phone: 516-781-0835). The authors would like to thank the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion for its research grant, which made much of this work possible. We would also like to thank Jane Kelton and Brian Bartholomew for their help in preparing the manuscript for publication, and the editor and anonymous reviewers for their suggestions and comments.

(1) While at the organizational and leadership levels, secular humanists and atheists attempt to differentiate themselves from each other, at the participant level, there is considerable overlap between these groups. This is particularly true in strongly religious areas where any non-theist group is valued by freethinkers.



(2) The question regarding educational level, however, was not asked of participants in the Godless Americans March on Washington.

(3) Kurtz, in fact, reappropriated the term "secular humanist," which was used by freethinkers in the 1960s before it was appropriated by the religious right.