

Who Are Secular People?



**Myths and Facts
About the Biggest Minority
You've Never Heard Of**

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Welcome!

I'm Edwina Rogers, the secular leader whose organization produced this guide. This booklet is for you if you've never heard of secular people.

What does it mean? Who are we? We'll answer those questions.

We'll also reveal our big secret: *there are more of us, and we are more ordinary, than you think.*

Because of discrimination, many of us don't speak openly about our nonbelief in God. But we exist. Some 3% of Americans self-identify as secular people, with up to 20% belonging to no organized religion.

So you almost certainly know secular people among your friends, family members, or co-workers. This guide is for you if you want to understand and support a secular person having a difficult time in a society that can be full of hatred and stereotypes. Thank you so much. Just your seeking to understand will mean a lot to that person.

Or you might be a community leader wanting to partner with our network of local groups across the United States, [Community Action Network](#). We join neighborhood initiatives and solve local problems. We have energy, resources, and community spirit!

This guide will dispel the myths that cause accidental discrimination against us, and help you understand our viewpoint so that we can team up more effectively. You'll also want to get our guide, *Working with CAN: How your Group, School, and City Can Get the Most from Us*.

I guarantee you'll find pleasant surprises in this guide. Then give us a call.

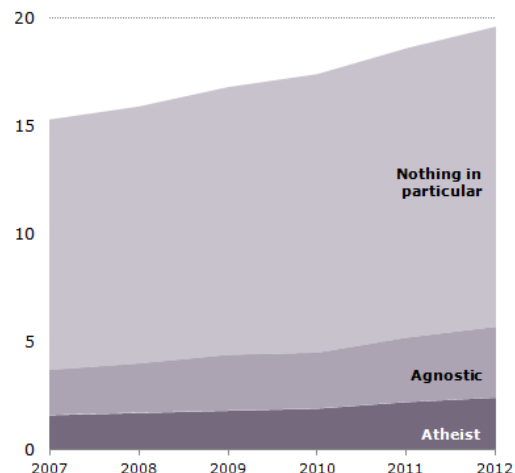
We are eager to build better communities together.

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% Americans Who Don't Believe in God



Source: [“Nones” on the Rise](#), Pew Research Center, 2012.

Who are Secular People?

Secular people are ordinary Americans who happen to not believe in God. We are teachers, parents, construction workers, bankers, and florists. We are men and women, straight and gay, from all income levels, all political parties, all nationalities, and all races.

Although some of us are raised without a religion, most of us were raised Christian, Jewish, or Muslim, and over time

We're not opposed to other people having a religion. It's just not part of our lives. Our attitude isn't that we oppose religion, although being unaffiliated it may be easier for us to see religion from an outsider's viewpoint. Most of the time, we're happy to ignore religion and hope it ignores us back.

Sometimes this is not possible. In the United States, religions have so much cultural influence that they can accidentally (or intentionally) bulldoze us out of public discourse. Christmastime can make us feel that the world doesn't know that we exist. Some are ostracized from their friends, family, and community for being different. Overseas, in some countries, not having faith can get us jailed or killed.

Despite this, in the developed world we live normal, joyful lives. We work, we play, we have families, and we try to make a difference in the world. Many of us have joined together to form the secular movement, a new social movement of nonbelievers who have decided to speak up and take pride in our philosophy.

There are many labels for secular people to choose from:

- **Secularist, nontheist, and nonbeliever** are blanket terms for those who don't believe in God that everyone in our movement accepts. We prefer 'secular' because that it doesn't have that Negative Nelly sounding 'non' prefix.
- **Atheist** is the most common nonbelief term. They believe strongly that God doesn't exist. Most nonbelievers don't mind casually being called an atheist (or Atheist, if you want to capitalize it), but some of us prefer other terms, sometimes strongly.
- **Agnostic** means unsure whether God exists. Sometimes, this is a well thought-out decision to sit on the fence. Sometimes, it's just not a priority to them to make a choice. Sometimes agnostics call themselves **spiritual, but not religious**. Sometimes agnostics attend religious services while maintaining the distance to choose for themselves what to believe.
- **Ethical Societies** want to discuss the principles that maximize human happiness and lead to fulfilling lives, just as religious people attend services partly to discuss morality. Because they so strongly support science, reason, and logical thinking, where humans can self-determine their own best values, they have much in common with us and will often affiliate openly with the secular movement. That being said, the purpose of an ethical society is not nonbelief and they have many religious members.
- **Ex-Muslim, Ex-Mormon, and Ex-Christian** are common terms for those who have left a faith.
- **Freethinkers** and **Brights** are major groups of nonbeliever who prefer their own terms.
- **Humanists** don't believe in God, but they do believe that humans need community and ceremony. Many humanists gather weekly to share philosophy and socialize, much like a church, but without a religious element. Outside the secular community, sometimes religious groups will use the word humanist to indicate warmth and attention to human desires and feelings. We use

the word humanist in the same way, but without religion. Sometimes it's clearer to call us **Secular Humanists**, but amongst ourselves, we just say 'humanists' for short.

- **Science** organizations have much in common with us, because as secularists we strongly support their goals of increasing science awareness, funding scientific research, and educating children and adults in what is often called **STEM**, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math. Although many science groups privately support secularism, to cast a wide umbrella and be as inclusive as possible, most of them do not openly take a position on religion and God. However, they will stand up for secular issues such as evolution, climate change, and the age of the Universe. Science organizations prefer to say, "We're not trying to oppose religion. We just don't understand why religions are ignoring the evidence of science on these issues." Secularists feel the same way.
- **Secular Jews** are congregations of Jewish people who are partly or lean atheist or agnostic. For some reason, nobody uses the terms 'secular Christian' or 'secular Muslim'.
- **Skeptics** are allies of the nonbelief movement, even though they may believe in God, because they stand up for science and reason. They want to live in a rational world where the things they believe can be proven with evidence. However, the point of a skeptic group is not to argue about God and religion. In fact, sometimes they decide to avoid these topics, to be more inclusive. Instead, the philosophy of skeptics is to oppose conspiracies such as Bigfoot, mentalism, and healing rock crystals, none of which are real.
- **Unitarian Universalists** are sometimes our allies. Their religion is open to people of all beliefs, even those who don't believe in God. Many congregations are more than half nonbelievers, or feel so strongly about the right to choose that they will openly affiliate with secular groups. The others all show us respect and will work with us privately, but have too many members of faith to take an official, public position supporting secularism.

Some people will use more than one term to describe themselves, and it doesn't matter whether or not you capitalize the terms, even though religious terms like Christian and Jewish are always capitalized.

What's it like to not believe in God?

From your viewpoint, you may find it strange that we can function, that we can enjoy life, and that we can find our way morally through the world. We do it in the same way that you do. When a preacher gives you advice, it's up to you to decide how to interpret it. When you read guidance in a Holy Book, it's also up to you to apply that to your own life decisions. We take what we know about the world, and we make good choices, using our heads and hearts.

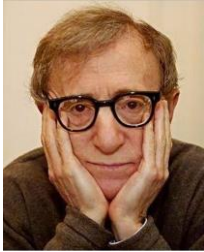
We are good to our friends and community. We work hard at our jobs. We support our families.

We're surprisingly just like you.

Famous Secular People

Since 3% of Americans openly identify themselves as atheists in surveys, and as much as 20% of our country does not belong to an organized religion, it's no surprise that secularists are everywhere. However, because of discrimination, many of us keep our philosophy to ourselves.

Here is a selection of the celebrities who have had the courage to openly talk about their nonbelief.



Woody Allen
3 Academy Awards



Fred Armisen
"Saturday Night Live"



Kevin Bacon
Golden Globe Winner



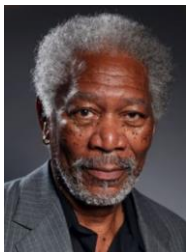
Javier Bardem
Academy Award Winner



Richard Branson
Founder of Virgin Group



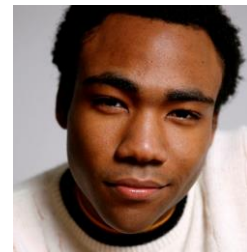
Jodie Foster
2 Academy Awards



Morgan Freeman
Academy Award Winner



Ira Glass
Public Radio



Donald Glover
Actor, "Community"



Stephen Hawking
Albert Einstein Medal



Katharine Hepburn
3 Academy Awards



Eric Idle
Tony, Grammy Awards,
"Monty Python"



Samuel L. Jackson
“Pulp Fiction”, “Star Wars”



Billy Joel
6 Grammy Awards



Angelina Jolie
2 Academy Awards



Bruce Lee
Actor, “Enter the Dragon”



John Legend
9 Grammy Awards



John Malkovich
2 Oscar Nominations



Julianne Moore
4 Oscar Nominations



Brad Pitt
Academy Award Winner



Daniel Radcliffe
Actor, “Harry Potter”



Ron Reagan
Son of the US President,
Radio Personality



Chris Rock
Comedian, 3 Emmys



Shakira
2 Grammy Awards



Sarah Silverman
Comedian, 2 Emmys



Emma Thompson
2 Academy Awards



Neil deGrasse Tyson
Scientist,
Emmy Nominee, “Cosmos”

What Makes Secular People Different?

The first way that secular people are different is our philosophy. Although it's easier to explain ourselves using a negative, saying that we *don't* believe in religion, to us our approach to life is very positive. We do have things to believe in: science and reason. We'd prefer to rephrase that without the word 'believe', saying that *science and reason have proven fantastically useful to understand reality*.

We want solutions in our life that work. Who doesn't? To us, the big question is, how do you prove what works? Sometimes there is no way to know, but science and reason are the best tools that humanity has. Using evidence and proof, we can understand the world and make it better.

Some raise the point that science can't answer every question, but that doesn't mean it answers none. Unlike with faith, the answers that science provides can be tested, challenged, and proven. Just look at modern medicine, which came from science, not faith. Medical science saves lives.

Scientific thinking gives us more than just gadgets. Reasoned thought can be applied in our everyday lives. For society's moral choices, we think, what's the most effective (proven and real) way to make society happy, while embracing human principles of fairness to minority populations and our planet? For our day to day life choices, we think, what's the most effective (proven and real) way to make a good decision, while remaining true to myself and my own principles?

Some people feel that navigating these big issues is impossible without faith, but we respectfully disagree. We make it work all the time. While we respect people of faith, to us "taking something on faith" seems too much like blindly following authority. God may be infallible, but preachers who interpret scripture can get it wrong. We've also noticed that faith is taken to mean, "search your heart". Unfortunately, as anyone who has loved the wrong person knows, our hearts can mislead us. Of course secular people listen to our feelings, but our heads are smarter, so we try to put them first.

We also listen to experts. When choosing between our gut instinct and the advice of a million scientists who have spent a career studying the age of the Universe, we'll go with the experts. What's the point of having brilliant experts if we're going to ignore them? Wouldn't it be frightening if our guts really did control the form and shape of the world? Unlike some religions, experts don't mind being challenged, because they can back up what they say with proof.

That doesn't mean that we hate religion or that we hate religious people. We just don't take it for granted that when religion speaks, the conversation is over. We don't like the idea that one part of society assumes they can speak as a moral authority for the entire society. We'll speak for ourselves, thank you.

Unfortunately, this makes it look like we oppose religion, because to get our voice in edgewise, we need to get religious leaders to stop dominating the conversation. We admit that some prominent atheists seem very cranky. That's a result of two factors that are changed. First, the earliest nonbelievers to speak up were by their nature the wildest of us, in the same way that the first gay people to march in public parades wore rainbow colors. Nowadays, openly gay people, loud and quiet, are found in every segment of society. The second is that discrimination against secular people in the past has been so high that there was bound to be some discord.

This is all changing now that more secular people are being open about their beliefs, and that discrimination has lessened just enough to allow us to feel more heard when speaking. Community Action Network, the project that wrote this guide, is emblematic of this new attitude amongst secular people. We don't attack religion. Instead we partner with families, schools, churches, and local on community initiatives. Using reason and science, we can help you solve local problems! We are eager to work with you.

America's Most Hated Minority?

A 2006 study from the [University of Minnesota](#) showed that atheists are “less likely to be accepted, publicly and privately, than any others from a long list of ethnic, religious, and other minority groups.” According to a 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center, more than half of Americans would be less likely to vote for a qualified US presidential candidate who did not believe in God, putting secular people right at the bottom of disliked minority groups. Seven US states prohibit atheists for running for public office. It's implausible that not one of the 535 members of Congress is secular, but none have said so publicly, surely due to discrimination.

It can be hard to see discrimination, but if you think about it, the following imply that nonbelievers just aren't as good:

- “Churches are our moral leaders.”
- “Everything is better when a church gets involved.”
- “You need religion to be a good person.”
- “Religious organizations are by their nature flawless. We must not allow them to be criticized.”

Other kinds of discrimination seek to marginalize or exclude secular people. The meaning is, “You're not normal”, or “You're not really one of us”:

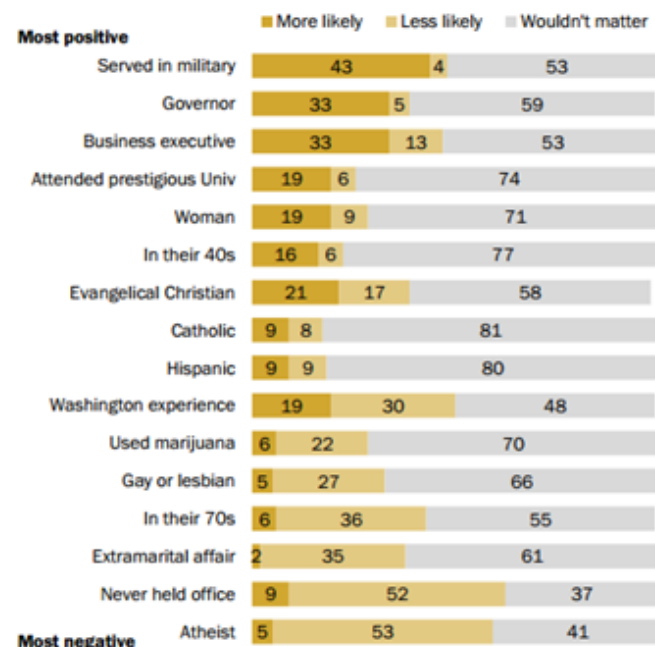
- “Our group will pray before this meeting. If you want to sit silently, that's your choice.”
- “America is a Christian country.”
- “We needed moral guidance, so we assembled an interfaith group of religious leaders.”
- “In God We Trust” (on currency)

In developed countries, discrimination against secular people does not often lead to violence that African Americans, gays, and other minorities suffer. However, hatred can destroy family, friend, and business relationships. In heavily religious areas of the country, a nonbeliever can be ostracized from an entire community, a traumatic experience requiring counseling that is too rarely available, especially when compared to our country's rich support groups for victims of substance abuse, domestic abuse, and chronic illness. We don't really know whether secular people are the most hated American minority. But we know that discrimination exists, and that while most people want to end discrimination based on race, religion, gender, and sexual orientation... discrimination against we who *don't* have a religion has been overlooked. It's taken for granted that something is wrong with secular people, and that's not right.

In the developing world, speaking up for secular values can get you jailed or killed by your government, especially in North Africa and the Middle East. Privately, discrimination often leads to murder.

Views of Presidential Traits: Positives and Negatives

How would each impact your likelihood of supporting a candidate ...



Source: Pew Research Center, “For 2016... [Atheism Top Negative for Potential Candidates](#)”, May 2014

Why Should I Care About Atheists?

That's a reasonable question! First, just a reminder: only some of us call ourselves atheists. Better terms for those who have no religion and don't believe in God are nonbeliever, nontheist, secularist, and our favorite term, **secular people**.

We shouldn't have to point out that, like any human beings, nonbelievers deserve respect and a normal place in society. But if that's not convincing, just think about our size. If you were a politician, you would want our vote!

- A 2012 Pew Research study put the number of atheists at 2.4%, but with plenty of room for some of the 3.3% of agnostics and 13.9% of "nothing in particular" portions to ally with us or come out of the closet as nonbelievers.
- The same study showed that 34% of people under 21 had no religious affiliation, and that 49% of Americans "seldom or never" attended religious services.
- A 2004 [BBC poll](#) found that 10% of Americans don't believe in God. A [2008 Gallup poll](#) found 6%.

Even if you're not a politician, don't you still "want our vote"? Don't you want nonbelievers to feel safe and respected so they will frequent your businesses, contribute to your community projects, and build a happier and more social neighborhood?

Some might say, "That's fine for you, but stay in your corner. We'll live in separate communities." Unfortunately, there are times when this is just not possible. We share the roads and town squares. We shop at the same local businesses. We share public discourse on social progress and lawmaking. We share tax burdens and social responsibility. Saying that atheists should stay in their corner is just another way that religious people unintentionally (or intentionally) want to shut out a large minority that only seems small because many of us keep our opinions to ourselves.

We are not small, as the surveys show. We deserve your attention. And nobody wants to be a bigot, someone who discriminates out of hatred or ignorance.

Fortunately, there is good news! *It doesn't take much to include us.*

As Americans, we are the world's melting pot, and we pride ourselves on our tolerance to minorities. We pass laws against discrimination, establish building codes to help the disabled, and value diversity in our community. Most importantly, we further social change by speaking out against bigots. We know it's our job to make minorities feel safe. Otherwise, that's called the "tyranny of the majority", a phrase coined by US President John Adams in 1788 meaning that might does not make right. The majority can suppress the minority, but shouldn't.

So what do secular people want, to feel that we are a respected and normal part of society? That's the topic of the next section.

What do Secular People Want?

We're not trying to convert people

There are many myths about secular people. We don't wear horns, we don't dance with the Devil, and we don't seek to destroy religion. It's true that some atheists try to convert people to secularism, but the percentage of nonbelievers who proselytize is dramatically lower than the percentage of religious people who proselytize. The average secular person is too afraid of discrimination to even discuss his or her opinion, never mind attempt to convert others.

Mostly, secular people struggle just to breathe and feel normal in a society that is so dominated by religious thinking. We try to ignore religion, but sometimes it cannot be ignored because we live in the same community. Taken collectively, religions have so much cultural influence that it can be stifling.

Generally speaking, secular people want four things.

To end discrimination against secular people

Secular people should not be shunned from society. At home, we want our family and friends to accept us for who we are. In our community, we don't want to be vilified or looked down upon as immoral. Through government, we want our laws to be fair to secularism. This sometimes make it looks like we are fighting religion, but really we are just calling to end unfair religious privilege.

For example, hospitals and the US armed services have chaplains that provide counseling to patients and soldiers. These chaplains are interdenominational, so they can counsel a person of any faith. However, they don't receive training about how to comfort secular people, nor are secular people allowed to apply to be chaplains. *We don't see fixing this as fighting religion in any way!* We just want secular people to be included.

How can this be fixed? It's easy. We just need Americans to accept that secular people and secular values are a normal, healthy, and valuable part of society. The rest will follow naturally.

To promote science and reason

We have so much in common. Just like you, we want doctors to make diagnoses using science instead of prayer. And just like you, we want courtroom decisions to be made on the basis of evidence. A jury that ignored the evidence and looked to faith for the answer would not be responsible.

Secular people feel that all of society's decisions should be made responsibly. To us this means our decisions should have solid reasons behind them, facts that can be tested and proven with evidence.

For example, research shows that vaccinations save lives, and that fears about safety have no basis in reality. To rephrase that, if you fear vaccines, *you have been duped by fake science*. That's a claim that we can back up with evidence, if you let us show you the way.

We want the same things you want. Nobody wants to be duped, and everyone wants healthy children. So let's discuss. Our secular viewpoint can contribute much to public dialogue.

To be heard when faith tries to speak for all of us

It's easy to be confused by the phrase, "separation of church and state". It means that the government shouldn't run churches, and churches shouldn't run government. But churchgoers are Americans, and we all have freedom of speech. Shouldn't religious people have a voice in government?

Of course! It's only a problem when faith tries to speak for all of us. If you say, "Our Christian morals should steer the nation," we must remind you that all Americans are not Christians. You cannot demand respect. Instead, earn it by convincing us that you are right. Wouldn't that yield a far more satisfying result, to bring us over to your side instead of pretending we don't exist?

Again, our desire to be respected and heard can be misinterpreted as wanting to fight religion. Well, when a very powerful group claims a monopoly on morality... we can see how they would want to keep it! And they might be tempted to use loaded phrases such as, "Why are you trying to fight us?" when really, we're just asking to have our voices be respected. We don't want to fight. Let's share influence in equal measure to the size of our community, the strength of our arguments, and the conviction of our people. All we're asking for is a seat at the table.

To build a better world for everyone

Like all people, secular people want success for our families, our communities, our nation, and the world. We want to be responsible citizens. We want personal happiness at home and at work. We want to make a difference.

Because we believe in reason in science so strongly, we think we have a special viewpoint that can help build a better world. If you own a smart phone or a car, or if you have benefited from air conditioning or modern dentistry, you can't completely disagree that science brings something special to the planet.

So let us work for you. By hearing our voices, by partnering with us, you get the advantage of our special talents. Together we can do great things.

Answers to Questions

Why are Atheists so angry?

That's just a stereotype. Sadly, it's a stereotype that we helped create, because historically some of the most outspoken secular leaders have taken an antagonistic tone. In the past, discrimination against secular people was so severe that only the most strident people were brave enough to raise their voices. Understandably, they often had a chip on their shoulder, again because of severe discrimination, which made them feel that the world was against them.

This happens whenever there is social change. In the early civil rights movement, there were a lot of understandably angry African American voices. In the early gay rights movement, those brave enough to march in public parades were the ones who were the most fed up. Like the pioneers of secularism, they did not necessarily represent the mood of the average person.

The average secular person does not have bottled up anger, and we never have. There's a new movement of outspoken secular leaders who never attack religion. Instead, we want to find common ground. We have a lot in common! We all want a better society. Secular people do see injustices that should be fixed, but we can all agree that injustice is bad, right? So why not work together?

We're sorry that our movement seemed angry. Let us show you our friendly side.

Why do you hate God?

We don't even believe in God, so it's hard to hate him. We think you're being a bit defensive.

Feeling defensive is a normal human reaction when we feel challenged. When the secular movement speaks up and says, "Hey! If not all Americans believe in God, why does it have the word 'God' on our money?" you can have one of two reactions:

- Reaction 1: They've got a good point. Maybe we should discuss this.
- Reaction 2: They're out to get us!

Try not to have reaction number two. Let's start from the assumption of good intentions. We raise concerns because we actually have concerns, not because we're out to get you.

Why are you trying to take God away?

We don't want to take God away. In your private churches, your private homes, and your private lives, please do as you wish!

However, in common spaces, not everyone believes in God. We'd just like an acknowledgement of that.

If you want to phrase that as taking God away, that's a bit like the child in the sandbox who won't share saying, "Why are you trying to take my sandbox?" It's not your sandbox. We share society together, and not everyone believes in God.

What about the War on Christmas?

Don't you think the word 'war' is a loaded term? Is anyone firing guns? Have people been killed?

Let's face it. The phrase 'War on Christmas' is a made up term intended to smear the secular community. It's like calling your ex-girlfriend a whore or calling President Obama a Kenyan.

Actually, most secular people love Christmas. We like having the day off. Many of us were raised with Christian traditions, and we like the gift giving, the music, and the decorations.

A few of us find it annoying to be told, “Merry Christmas” because it assumes that we are Christian. And we do get tired of religious symbols being placed where atheist symbols aren’t allowed. Christmas dominates two months out of every year. It is the biggest cultural juggernaut of all time. If that’s not enough power for you, and you need to resent a tiny piece of acknowledgement that secular people want, that’s not very generous. You are overwhelmingly rich with the success and pervasiveness of Christmas. You can afford to give a little. It’s the giving time of year.

How can you be moral without God?

It’s not rocket science. When we see someone in pain, we try to help. We don’t run around murdering people because we don’t have a religion.

Even when you are told what to do by a religious leader, or through prayer, or through reading scripture, you are still making the choice to follow, to interpret, and to accept what to do. So you are making your own choices in the same way that we do. We take in what we know about the world, how we feel, and what seems right to us and those we trust. Then we make choices.

We have the same conscience and sense of goodwill towards others that you do.

How can you be happy without God?

Nobody likes to think about death, and the idea that nobody’s “driving the bus” of the Universe can be scary. It makes us feel small and unimportant. Finding our own way in the world, our own purpose, is a challenge so confusing that it can be shattering.

On the other hand, living under an all-powerful authority who judges us and can send us to Hell is pretty frightening, too. Christians sometimes describe themselves as God fearing. Secularists don’t live in fear.

Secular people, especially those of us who prefer the term humanists, celebrate the idea that human beings can chart their own course. We love the challenge of understanding of nature and working out our own morality. Instead of fixating on death, we embrace life. Do you like the community and ethical aspects of churchgoing? We love those things, too, and many of us attend weekly gatherings to socialize and discuss the big issues of life. These events don’t have a religious component, but they take what we feel are the best parts of religious tradition. We acknowledge the need for people to come together.

We have another thing in common with you. While we don’t use the word ‘spiritual’, secular people also experience awe and wonder at the Universe. From the tiniest piece of an atom to the largest galaxy, there are so many amazing things to discover! So if you find the world miraculous, magical, and thrilling, we feel exactly the same as you.

You must believe in something?

Why must we? Because you can’t handle the idea that we don’t?

We get it. To many people, imagining a world without God would be like the Earth stopped spinning and everyone flew off. Their philosophy of decision-making is rooted so heavily in religion that without it, they feel that they would have no way to make choices, no way to be moral, and no way to understand their role in a seemingly uncaring Universe.

It's not like that at all for us. It's more like discovering when you were a child that Santa Claus did not exist. First you were shocked, and then perhaps angry at your parents. Then you felt like you had lost something special and were very sad. These feelings lasted a few weeks. And then you were fine.

At least, we hope that you're not still feeling trauma about Santa Claus. We're doing okay about God.

We don't feel that we're denying ourselves something, like we've gone on a diet and we're hungry all the time. Our philosophy is self-supporting. There's no "God shaped hole" in our hearts. Living without God actually clears up many problems for some of us. We don't wonder why there is suffering in the world. We don't wonder why God doesn't answer prayers. We don't worry about how to interpret scripture, because we know we must figure out life for ourselves.

It's true that someone leaving religion can experience trauma, but leaving religion can also be healing for many of us. We can always go back, but almost all of us choose not to, just like few children choose to go back to believing in Santa. Thank you for concern, but we're doing fine.

What about on your deathbed?

Death is scary and can make people panic. There's another saying, "There are no atheists in a foxhole," which is supposed to mean that during a war, the fear of death makes everyone grasp for something.

It's a bit arrogant of you to think that under pressure secular people would all give up our life's philosophy and conveniently choose your religion instead.

Let's do a thought experiment. What if a criminal broke into your house with a gun, and threatened to kill you unless you did something terrible... harmed a child, for example. You might give in, but you might also stand up for your principles. Most of us are sure we'd stand up, of course!

It's like that for secular people on their deathbeds. We don't just abandon our principles, no matter how comforting a stereotype that might seem to religious people.

What about the children?

It's a bit arrogant of you to suggest that without religion, our kids will grow up to be hellions. They don't.

Will you come to my church?

It depends how you ask. It's difficult to invite us to church without the implication that what you've got is better than what we've got. That is a kind of condescension.

On the other hand, if your intention is to genuinely get to know us, so that you'll listen to us as well as speak your own mind, we might say yes. Perhaps we'll bring you to a Humanist celebration, a church-like experience run by people who just happen to not believe in God.

If you don't have an arrogant mentality that we need to be saved, if you will take a "no" for a "no" if we politely decline, if you don't look down on secular people as inferior, and if you're open to a two-way conversation... there's a lot we can discuss.

Otherwise, it's probably better not to ask.

For Friends and Family of Secular People

Someone you know has told you that they don't believe in God anymore. Or perhaps they never did. Take a deep breath and don't say anything you might regret. Just read this page and think about how you'll react. Understandably, this is a big change for your friend or family member. But it's also a big change for you, and it can feel frustrating and confusing.

Don't you want to be saved? How can you walk away from the family? What will grandma think? Is it my duty to win you back to the church?

The most important thing to keep in mind is that it's not about you. It's his or her choice. Your friend or family member was brave to trust you and be open about who they really are. You have an opportunity to reward that trust, to react with kindness and empathy. He or she needs you right now.

People choose to leave religion for a variety of reasons, but rarely because of friends and family. Your friend's secularism is *not an attack on your faith, or an abandonment of you personally*. Each person in your family has personality quirks. This one doesn't have to be any different. And it hardly means abandoning tradition. Really, secular people have much the same kindness, warmth, and family values that Christians and other religious families are known for. You just have to get to know us to break through some negative and untrue stereotypes.

Let's say that again. *Nothing has really changed between you and your friend*. Think about the big picture, all the good times that you have shared with your friend or family member. That hasn't changed. And your friend is still the same person, especially if he or she has secretly been a nonbeliever for a long time. There's no reason why you can't continue your relationship as you always have. You just won't be going to church together.

You may have a faith that is so strong that you wish to protect it, even at the risk of destroying a friend or family relationship. Don't be quick to say something that you can't take back. There are years of happiness and trust that you could throw away by assuming that you have the moral authority to judge, because you are better than your friend is. Or you might say something out of hurt, when you are not being attacked. This isn't about you.

We live in a diverse world of people who make their own choices: Christians, Jews, Muslims, and many others. Your friend's choice is his or her own, and should be respected.

Once you've decided to support your friend, carry on your relationship as normal. You can ask any question, and you can even invite them to come to church. The important thing is your tone of voice. If what you're doing is secretly undermining your friend because you don't trust he or she will make good choices, that's going to be sensed and probably cause distance between you.

What your friend needs most right now is for you to confirm your relationship. You don't have to say you support the decision, but acknowledge that it is his or her decision to make. That is enough.

For example, you might say, "This isn't a choice that I could ever see *myself* making, but I trust you. If you believe this is right for you, then you have to do it. And I know that if it doesn't make you happy, you'll figure that out. Either way, I am here for you, because I love you, and I support you."

Who are secular people? Don't they have horns and worship the Devil? Those answers and more can be found in the rest of this guide. (The answer is no, by the way.)

For Businesses

Secular people, those who do not believe in God, are a large and growing minority in the United States. If you run a business, then some of your employees, customers, or suppliers may be secular people. Your business will be more successful if you understand and acknowledge them.

In the workplace, you already know that religious discrimination is illegal. Without directly asking about your staff's personal beliefs, you can set a company policy that expresses openness to people of all faiths, and people of no faith. Just being mentioned in such a statement is a courtesy that secular people rarely get, and they will take notice. You should also remind staff that harassment on the basis of religion is illegal and can bring liability for the employer, and that they should be courteous to people from all backgrounds, including secular people. If you work in a region where there is a great deal of discrimination, you may wish to call in a trainer to educate your staff. Staff who repeatedly try to "save the soul" of a fellow employee who is an atheist are acting just as illegally as staff who harass someone wearing a Jewish yarmulke.

What can you do to make secular customers feel welcomed and respected? Just say that they are.

Have you ever seen a business with a sign in the front window that says "Se habla español"? These signs do much more than say, you are welcome to speak Spanish here. It is an invitation to the entire Spanish community that if they shop at this store, they will be appreciated and understood.

The secular community faces great discrimination in the United States, and even a small gesture of openness will generate sales for you. Consider a sign that says, "We value diversity. We welcome customers of any faith, and of none." Then contact local secular groups to let them know. You will get their attention, guaranteed. Secular groups keep directories of local businesses that are friendly, and they are loyal to those that do.

If you have a work philosophy that is strongly drawn from religious values, you can find a way to communicate that to your staff and customers in a way that doesn't make them think they are entering a church, or that they are not welcome if they don't share your faith. Remove religious symbolism but keep the message, if you want a sign that says "We believe in human kindness," without a cross.

If your business sponsors local charities, including religious charities, consider including a secular group in your donations and community outreach. Of course, you want your investment to do good in your neighborhood, but you also see it as building good will that will drive business. Think of secular groups as a valuable opportunity. Due to discrimination, they get little attention. So you will get a high level of response and gratitude when you choose to engage with them. If you stock jewelry with religious symbols, perhaps you'll choose to include science or atheist choices among them.

Is it important to avoid saying "Merry Christmas"? Not really. What's more important is to not to assume that every customer of yours is a Christian. Christmas is time when secular people, and other non-Christians, feel the heavy cultural impact that reminds them that they are a minority, often marginalized from the mainstream. So it really matters to us to get an acknowledgement especially in December. If you find the phrase "Happy Holidays" too sanitized and bland, you might say, "If you celebrate the holiday, then Merry Christmas to you!" or "Merry Christmas if that's your thing!"

Smart business owners understand their customers. Thank you for taking the time to understand secular people. You'll find the rest of this guide full of information about who we are and how we think.

For Government and School Officials

Secular people form an important minority in your community. Nearly 3% of Americans openly do not believe in God, and 20% of Americans belong to no organized religion. Secularists have many skills and resources to contribute to local projects. They are a constituency worth your time to understand and engage with, through a few easy gestures.

If you work for local government or at a school, you are already aware of laws that protect people from religious discrimination, and have made your staff aware of this as well. Many people however don't realize that secularism is also protected. In your employee training sessions, just a mention of this would be appreciated. Staff who repeatedly try to "save the soul" of a fellow employee who is an atheist are acting just as illegally as staff who harass someone wearing a Jewish yarmulke.

What can you do to make secular members of your community feel welcomed and respected? Just say that they are.

Why is it so important to avoid prayer at local meetings? Prayer is an activity that gathers everyone together into a unified call for success. It energizes your group, reminds them what they have in common, and breaks the ice so that they can work well together. However, when not everyone at your meeting believes in God, this excludes them. It's the opposite of team building. It demoralizes the group, reminds them what they don't have in common, and creates friction. It's like saying, "The normal people are going to pray now. You outsiders can sit there silently if you want to, and watch."

You might be thinking, but prayer is central to my life's philosophy! I don't want to give it up! You are right. Showing respect to minorities can be inconvenient, just like building wheelchair ramps for the handicapped costs the town money. But it has to be done. And it is the right thing to do. Take on a tiny bit of inconvenience, and you will be rewarded with great engagement and support from the secular community!

Find a creative solution, such as meeting with friends at the church before the meeting to pray. Perhaps you could pray to yourself without making it a group activity. Better yet, find other ways to rally the group. Secular people and religious people have so much in common. If you wanted to say, "Before this meeting, I wanted to remind everyone how privileged we are to be together, and how excited I am about building the future with you," you'll be energizing your group without excluding anyone.

Finally, as government or school leaders, you are responsible to leading your neighborhood. Work to reduce discrimination against secular people, by educating your community. Tell them that it's not okay to harass secular people for their nonbelief. Show them that secular people have important ideas to contribute by including them in your interfaith groups and community decision-making. Encourage individuals to support the religious choices of their friends and family, instead of making secularism a reason for relationships to fragment.

What do secular people want the most? Just to be an accepted and normal part of your town. It can be as easy as your saying, "We support people of all faiths, and of no faith."

We support you, too! Reach out to secular groups such as Community Action Network, the organization that created this guide. We join community initiatives and run volunteer programs to help improve the neighborhood. We have a unique viewpoint, that science and reason can bring demonstrably proven solutions to resolve local issues. You'll find that we have great resources to contribute and that we'll be eager to help.

How Can I Learn More?

The Community Action Network (CAN) organizes local groups across the United States to get involved in community initiatives. Our goal is to use our strengths in science and reason to solve local problems, and to generate good will for our minority – and let you get to really know us as people – by directly engaging with partners for the betterment of the neighborhood.

We'll partner with families, schools, churches, local government, and non-profit organizations on volunteer projects, fundraising, and more. See our website at www.CommunityActionNetwork.org for more information, and send us an email or give us a call! We'd love to hear from you.

CAN is a project of the Secular Policy Institute (SPI), the world's biggest secular think tank, and the world's largest coalition of secular groups. Through its world leading thinkers, we study the demographics of secular people, religious trends, and the effectiveness of laws and government policies that relate to belief and nonbelief. We write public policy papers and advocate for secular values. Many churches are members of our coalition and we partner with any organization that wants to end discrimination against secular people or support science and reason in government policy.

Our coalition features more than 250 members, including America's largest secular groups. Visit www.SecularPolicyInstitute.net to see the complete list of nationwide and local groups near you!



Ex-Muslims of North America



International
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