



Atheists. Agnostics. Humanists.  
Americans.

# SECULAR AMERICA

## A PRIMER FOR JOURNALISTS

**THE SECULAR COALITION FOR AMERICA** and its voting member organizations produced this primer to assist professional journalists in their goals of factual accuracy, clarity, and objectivity in their reporting.

We offer these tools and resources to help journalists create quality pieces that reflect the myriad of opinions of Americans today. The reality is that covering topics relating to religion requires talking to both believers and nonbelievers. Our toolkit aims to provide those resources in a quick, easy to use format that makes reporting easier and more efficient.

### WHY SHOULD YOU LEARN MORE ABOUT SECULAR AMERICANS?

At nearly a quarter of our total population, nonreligious Americans represent a growing segment of our society and a sizeable voice on politics, policy, and current events.

The work of covering that group fairly and accurately as it grows is a substantial challenge for reporters. That is especially true when related to hot-button issues like reproductive rights, religion-based discrimination, and religious displays in public spaces, all of which the secular community has a huge stake in.

As a community, secular Americans aren't asking for special treatment from the press. But we are cognizant that the media has reinforced misconceptions held toward the secular community in the past, either directly or through acts of omission, and we hope this primer helps reporters better navigate those challenges moving forward.

### WHAT CAN YOU FIND HERE?

#### CONTEXT

Background on secular America and definitions of common terms used in the nontheist community, agreed upon by our 19 member organizations

#### DATA

Cited, current statistics on the nonreligious and where to look in the future

#### GUIDANCE

A list of pitfalls often found in coverage of the secular community and how to avoid them

# SECULARISM

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IN



AMERICA

Secularism is a principle that involves two basic propositions. The first is the **strict separation of state institutions from religious institutions**. The second is that **people of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law**.

Commonly, **Secularist** applies to all those who believe religion should be separate from government whether they believe in god(s) or not.

## THE U.S. CONSTITUTION MENTIONS RELIGION ONLY TWICE

THE FIRST AMENDMENT STATES, “CONGRESS SHALL MAKE NO LAW RESPECTING AN ESTABLISHMENT OF RELIGION, OR PROHIBITING THE FREE EXERCISE THEREOF.”

ARTICLE VI **FORBIDS** A RELIGIOUS TEST AS A REQUIREMENT FOR HOLDING A GOVERNMENTAL POSITION.

### ADDITIONALLY:

- ▶ THE UNITED STATES HAS NO OFFICIAL STATE RELIGION
- ▶ OUR CONSTITUTION MAKES NO REFERENCE TO CHRISTIANITY OR DEISM AND INSTEAD DERIVES ITS POWER FROM “WE THE PEOPLE”

For secularists, the secular character of America’s Constitution reinforces their belief that the United States government was founded to be and should be a secular body. That secular character has been under siege since the nation’s inception, notably in the 1950s when Congress both inserted “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance and made “In God We Trust” our national motto.

More recently, lawmakers have specifically cited their personal faith as grounds for implementing policies like abortion restrictions, prayer in public schools, funding for parochial schools through vouchers, federal funding for church facilities, and more. These actions align with the beliefs of the modern Christian Nationalist movement, which believes the country is, at its core, Christian, and seeks to establish a government that conforms to their worldview. <sup>1</sup>


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1. Christians Against Christian Nationalism, “Statement.” <http://bit.ly/2yIEWG8>

# SECULAR AMERICANS


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 **25.5%**  
OF AMERICANS ARE NONRELIGIOUS,  
AND THAT NUMBER IS GROWING <sup>2</sup>

 **64 MILLION**  
RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED ADULTS IN  
THE U.S.—MORE NUMEROUS THAN  
EITHER CATHOLICS OR MAINLINE  
PROTESTANTS <sup>5,6</sup>

 **20**  
STATES IN WHICH NO RELIGIOUS GROUP  
COMPRISES A GREATER SHARE OF  
RESIDENTS THAN THE RELIGIOUSLY  
UNAFFILIATED <sup>8</sup>

 **78%**  
SAY THEY WERE RAISED AS A MEMBER OF A PARTICULAR RELIGION BEFORE SHEDDING THEIR  
RELIGIOUS IDENTITY IN ADULthood <sup>10</sup>

 **4.4%**  
INCREASE IN THE NUMBER OF  
PEOPLE WHO CONSIDER  
THEMSELVES “RELIGIOUSLY  
UNAFFILIATED” FROM  
2013-2018 <sup>3,4</sup>

 **60%**  
OF AMERICANS SAY THEY  
WOULD VOTE FOR AN ATHEIST  
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATE.  
THAT NUMBER WAS 18% IN  
1958 <sup>7</sup>

 **71%**  
OF UNAFFILIATED AMERICANS ARE  
YOUNGER THAN 50 YEARS OLD <sup>9</sup>

2. Public Religion Research Institute, "The American Values Atlas." 2018, Unaffiliated, States. <http://bit.ly/2Sig9Se>

3. Public Religion Research Institute, "The American Values Atlas." 2018, Unaffiliated, States. <http://bit.ly/2Sig9Se>

4. Public Religion Research Institute, "The American Values Atlas." 2013, Unaffiliated, States. <http://bit.ly/2XLZqrC>

5. Public Religion Research Institute, "The American Values Atlas." 2018, Religious Tradition, National. <http://bit.ly/2JMN5d>

6. Office of the Federal Register, "Estimates of the Voting Age Population for 2017." <http://bit.ly/2JzLCwD>

7. Gallup, "Less Than Half in U.S. Would Vote for a Socialist for President." <http://bit.ly/2EreLah>

8. Public Religion Research Institute, "America's Changing Religious Identity." <http://bit.ly/2xavVH3>

9. Ibid.

10. Pew Research Center, "Why America's 'nones' left religion behind." <https://pewrsr.ch/2O5oytA>



# COMMON TERMS IN THE SECULAR COMMUNITY

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THESE TERMS ARE USED REGULARLY WITHIN AND TO DESCRIBE DIFFERENT ELEMENTS OF THE SECULAR COMMUNITY.

**ATHEIST** Anyone who lacks a belief in god(s).

**AGNOSTIC** Someone who believes that it is impossible to know whether or not gods exist. Although technically incorrect, colloquially it is used to describe someone who is unsure about the existence of god(s).

**FREETHINKER** All-encompassing term for people who live their lives based on science, logic, and reason, who do not give deference to dogma or religion. Catch-all term for nontheistic people who don't necessarily self-identify as atheist or agnostic.

**HUMANIST** Humanists advance a progressive philosophy of life that, without theism or other supernatural beliefs, affirms our ability and responsibility to lead ethical lives of personal fulfillment that aspire to the greater good.

**HUMANISTIC JEW** Humanistic Jews identify with and celebrate the culture, history, and ethics of the Jewish people. They believe that humans are powerful and responsible for shaping their own lives rather than relying on supernatural or theistic notions of a supreme being.

**NONE** "Nones" are those without a religious affiliation and is a term used by polling institutions such as the Pew Research Center and Public Religion Research Institute. "Nones" may or may not believe in god(s).

**NONTHEIST** An umbrella or catch-all term for anyone who does not believe in god(s).

**SECULARIST** Term applied to those who believe in the separation of government and religion. Secularists may or may not believe in god(s). This can sometimes be used as an all-encompassing term for nontheists, although it is technically not synonymous.

**SKEPTIC** Skeptics affiliate with the modern skeptical movement, a grassroots phenomenon that aims at helping the public navigate the complex borderlands between sense and nonsense, science and pseudoscience. Skeptics do so by way of investigation of alleged extraordinary phenomena, mindful cultivation of critical thinking, and an honest attitude toward intellectual inquiry. Contrary to the popular stereotype, skeptics do not cynically reject new ideas, but rather adopt an attitude of both open mind and critical sense.



# WHO ARE THE RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED?

**16%**

WHO DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS RELIGIOUS  
DESPITE HAVING NO FORMAL RELIGIOUS IDENTITY <sup>11</sup>

**58%**

DESCRIBE THEMSELVES AS  
SECULAR OR NOT RELIGIOUS <sup>12</sup>

**27%**

AFFIRMATIVELY IDENTIFY AS  
"ATHEISTS AND AGNOSTICS" <sup>13</sup>

**46%**

OF AMERICA'S LGBTQ POPULATION IS RELIGIOUSLY  
UNAFFILIATED <sup>14</sup>

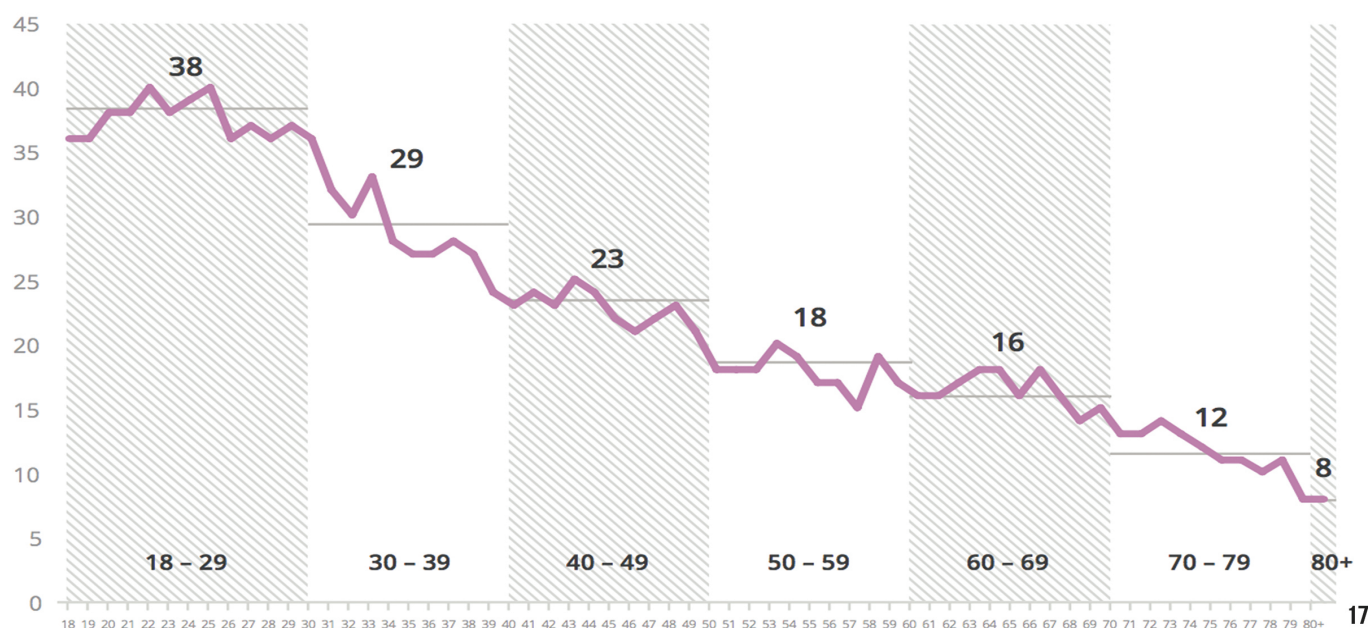
**37**

YEARS OLD IS THE MEDIAN AGE OF  
UNAFFILIATED AMERICANS. IN CONTRAST,  
THE MEDIAN AGE FOR WHITE EVANGELICAL  
PROTESTANTS AND WHITE CATHOLICS IS 55 <sup>15</sup>

**29%**

OF THE WESTERN U.S. POPULATION  
IS UNAFFILIATED, THE HIGHEST  
CONCENTRATION IN THE NATION <sup>16</sup>

**Percent Unaffiliated by Age**



11. Public Religion Research Institute, "America's Changing Religious Identity," <http://bit.ly/2xavVH3>

12. Ibid.

13. Ibid.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid. Direct image link: <http://bit.ly/30BypJf>

# COMMON COVERAGE PITFALLS

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## “I’M ACTUALLY AN ATHEIST”

TORNADO SURVIVOR REBECCA VITSMUN, IN RESPONSE TO CNN’S WOLF BLITZER ASKING, “YOU’VE GOTTA THANK THE LORD, RIGHT?”<sup>18</sup>

### PLAYING INTO THE STEREOTYPES

Atheists are often portrayed as angry, hateful, bitter, unhappy, religion-bashing, immoral, and overly sensitive—the stories told about atheists often set up that stereotype. While you will certainly find people in any group that fit this description, the vast majority of nontheists share many of the same values, ethics, and temperaments as those who believe in god(s).

- Broaden coverage of atheists by writing about issues that go deeper than standard church/state disputes.
- When the opportunity is there to show that a nontheist doesn’t fit stereotypes, don’t take nontheism out of the story altogether and reinforce the status quo through an act of omission.

### EQUAL TREATMENT OF RELIGIOUS DOGMA AND PROVABLE FACT

Often in an attempt to tell both sides of a story, religious dogma is given the same weight as fact-based evidence. An example is climate change, where equal time is often given to those who accept climate change and those who reject it—despite overwhelming scientific data to back up the theory and virtually no scientific evidence to reject it.

- Acknowledge and contextualize where each side disagreeing derives their perspective from.
- Elements of a story that can be backed up by fact, science, data, or other evidence should be given more weight and treated as more credible.

### LACK OF VARIETY IN SOURCING

Reporters tempted to turn to radical activist types on both sides of an issue may walk away with a good quote or sound bite, but often these sources play into negative stereotypes, are not necessarily representative of the community as a whole and often fail to elevate the discussion.

- There are hundreds of nontheists groups across the country both local and national that offer a variety of nontheist perspectives.
- When mentioning religious groups, include nontheist groups as well.

### PUTTING ATHEISTS ON THE DEFENSIVE

Often atheists are included in a story only when they are put on the defensive—being asked to defend an unpopular policy or position or responding to what a religious group has said. However, nontheists are involved in all aspects of American society and should be included in the same way other groups would be for stories on any number of topics.

- Include nontheist perspectives when writing about political and social issues such as education, the military, tax policy, health policy, and other issues that may intersect with religion.
- Consider historical context. Nontheists are often placed at odds with a government that is increasingly theocratic, despite our Constitution. Support for separation of church and state should, at the very least, be recognized as mainstream.

### WRITING THE SAME STORY

When journalists primarily cover narratives like ‘Atheists are furious because religious groups want to include religion in public life,’ they miss the opportunity to write about the much broader societal issues, touching human interest pieces, and more, that nontheists can offer. When people are doing good in their lives and their communities, if they credit their faith as guidance, it is covered—lack of faith and secular values deserve to be explored in the same manner.

- Allow atheists to tell their stories—many atheists have experienced discrimination and some have even been outcast by their family and friends for their nontheistic beliefs.
- When you ask questions about a moral foundation or beliefs, don’t shy away from exploring how being nonreligious is a part of someone’s story.

18. Los Angeles Times, “Wolf Blitzer’s Oklahoma atheist interview gets viewers talking,” <https://lat.ms/30CqjzR>

# WHY NONRELIGIOUS?

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## WHY DO RELIGIOUSLY UNAFFILIATED AMERICANS CHOOSE NOT TO IDENTIFY WITH A RELIGION?

**60%**

QUESTION A LOT OF RELIGIOUS  
TEACHINGS<sup>19</sup>

**49%**

DON'T LIKE THE POSITION  
CHURCHES TAKE ON  
SOCIAL/POLITICAL ISSUES<sup>20</sup>

**41%**

DON'T LIKE RELIGIOUS  
ORGANIZATIONS<sup>21</sup>

**37%**

DON'T BELIEVE IN GOD<sup>22</sup>

## SECULAR AMERICA ON POLITICS

**47%**

INDEPENDENT VOTERS<sup>23</sup>

**33%**

DEMOCRATIC VOTERS<sup>24</sup>

**11%**

REPUBLICAN VOTERS<sup>25</sup>

**74%**

SAY ABORTION SHOULD BE LEGAL IN ALL/MOST CASES (COMPARED TO 54 PERCENT OF GENERAL POPULATION)<sup>26</sup>

**74%**

BELIEVE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD NOT ENDORSE POLITICAL CANDIDATES (COMPARED TO 71 PERCENT<sup>27</sup> OF GENERAL POPULATION)

**66%**

BELIEVE RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS SHOULD NOT EXPRESS POLITICAL VIEWS (COMPARED TO 51 PERCENT OF GENERAL POPULATION)<sup>28</sup>

19. Pew Research Center, "Why America's 'nones' don't identify with a religion." <https://pewrsr.ch/2Y7KZCI>

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Public Religion Research Institute, "Young People Set to Impact the Debate on Women's Health Issues." <http://bit.ly/2xLGDSN>

27. Pew Research Center, "Most Americans oppose churches choosing sides in elections." <https://pewrsr.ch/2YcAY7a>

28. Ibid.





**Atheists. Agnostics. Humanists.  
Americans.**



## CONTACT SECULAR ORGANIZATIONS

Point your phone camera at the QR code below for contact information to PR staff representing secular organizations and a number of secular issue areas.



## ABOUT THE SECULAR COALITION FOR AMERICA

The Secular Coalition for America (SCA) is the nation's premier advocacy organization representing atheists, humanists, agnostics, and other nontheists. Located in Washington, D.C., the Secular Coalition for America lobbies the U.S. Congress, White House, and federal agencies on issues of concern to our constituency as well as coordinates activities with and provides resources to local secular communities across the country. Our mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints in the United States and strengthen the secular character of our government as the best guarantee of freedom for all.