Chapter 6
Secularist Rituals in the US: Solidarity and Legitimization

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This chapter is based on a longer and different version of a chapter that appears in our book Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America (Oxford University Press, 2014)

In recent years, the New Atheism and its polemical stance toward religion has been met with a kinder and more compassionate face, at least in the United States. Sometimes called the "New New Atheism," this camp emerged in the heat of battle between the New Atheists and theists, calling for a truce with religions as well as summoning secularists, our term for atheists and non-theistic humanists, to develop a more positive identity. Part of this agenda, as outlined in the bestselling book by Harvard humanist chaplain Greg Epstein, *Good Without God* (2009), is to cultivate a coherent ethical system, a greater sense of community and the practice of rituals.

Although a large segment of US secularists eschew the need for rituals, claiming that they have left such rudiments of religion behind, in this chapter we argue that rituals play a particularly important role in American organized humanist and atheist circles. The growth of the Sunday Assembly in the US, a movement of secularist "churches," started in Britain suggests that there is interest in community, rituals, even what can be called a "secular spirituality," among atheists. At the same time, more hardline atheists have opposed these developments.

We found that various kinds of secular rituals and other symbolic forms, such as commemorations, can play different functions—they may generate solidarity between atheists or play a legitimizing role for secularity in wider society. In this chapter, we look at the rituals created both intentionally or unintentionally by secularists. The results are based on findings of an internet survey of American atheist and secular humanist groups as well as ethnographic observations and textual analyses.

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American organized secularist groups have long been split between "debunking" or attacking religion—whether in a defensive or offensive mode—and trying to build community and a positive atheist identity. Positive atheism was evident in what was called religious humanism in the mid-twentieth century, which was most strongly embraced by the American Humanist Association, Ethical Culture and a significant segment of Unitarian-Universalists. 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, but it has served to divide the various camps of atheists.

In more recent years, a form of positive atheism (a redundant notion for many atheists since they see their atheism, ispo facto, as positive) can be seen in the secular humanist movement, which is defined as a system of ethics rather than as a movement attempting to negate theism. Paul Kurtz, the late founder of the Council on Secular Humanism, stressed this point about the positive nature of secular humanism in contrast to the New Atheism, although at first he was strongly supportive of these writings (a change in attitude which played a part in his resignation from the council). Kurtz (2008) also increasingly spoke of the need for rituals and an appeal to the emotional and aesthetic as well as the intellectual and scientific domains of life in establishing secular humanism.

Epstein's book seeks to rehabilitate religious humanism as he calls for secular versions of weddings, funerals, baby naming ceremonies, and observing secular holidays, such as "festivals of light" and solstices as substitutes for Christmas and Hanukah. He also popularizes and creates secular rituals and practices for secularists who are largely unaffiliated with atheist or humanist organizations. Following a functional definition of religion, Epstein proposes such alternatives as meditation (to induce the "relaxation response"), cognitive or rational emotive behavior therapy, which he calls the secularist equivalence of prayer, and cultivating a renewed appreciation of art.

6.1 Organized Secularists and Positive Atheism

How has the "New New Atheism" circulated and been received among secularist organizations? Inspired far more by Kurtz than Epstein, the Council for Secular Humanism and its parent body, Center for Inquiry (CFI), have inaugurated a "secular celebrant" program to provide officiates for non-religious weddings and other rites of passage. At the same time, as mentioned above, there has been controversy and divisions about the place of the New Atheism in the council's leadership (with a general consensus favoring the New Atheism and its more oppositional views and approach). What are their views on the importance of, and their participation in, secular rituals in their groups?

We asked 167 participants in US secular humanist, humanist, and atheist groups about these issues in an internet survey. Although it was not a random sample, we

attempted to obtain fair representation of the various organized secularist groups throughout the country. However, we especially focused on the secular humanists represented by the Council for Secular Humanism, not only because they are the largest subgroup of secularists but also because the umbrella group, at least under the leadership of Paul Kurtz, has been advocating some of the above changes. Most of our responses came from the Southeast and Northeast, which have markedly different constituencies—the former being far younger than found in most other segments of organized secularism. Pasquale (2010) found that the Pacific Northwest has the largest percentage of secular affiliates, so our largely Eastern sample may not be representative of organized secularism in the US. Generally, however, the demographic makeup of our survey reflects those of other studies, especially the greater proportion of men to women and whites to minorities who tend to participate in these groups (Pasquale 2010; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006).

The results of our survey showed that it is clear that most of the respondents want to retain the role of debunking religion, even if the "New New Atheists" might discourage it. This does not necessarily mean that they do not want to develop a positive image and agenda for secularists, but most do not want to discard their skeptical and even polemical edge toward religion. At the same time, almost half of respondents agreed that ritual needs to be given more attention in their organizations; only 26 % disagreed with the idea that such ceremonies should have a more regular role in such groups. Only 35 % had attended a secular ritual (we did not count those who cited rituals outside of these organizations, such as family events, Burning Man, sporting events), while almost 62 % said they would be open to participating in such ceremonies in their groups. However, there were some strong dissenters. As a 79 year-old self-identified secular humanist who was turned off by our survey stated: "The word 'ritual' drips with religiosity. Conformity is inherent in the meaning of the word. Atheists are 'free thinkers' and as such are quite capable of creating and personalize celebrations uniquely appropriate to each of their life events." She went on to assert that she would feel uncomfortable participating in a secular group that performed rituals and "would question the focus of such a group as being not truly atheistic."

However, over 32 % said rituals of some kind should have a regular part in their meetings. Most of these rituals involved rites of passage, such as weddings, funerals and baby naming ceremonies. But there were some more unusual ones, including de-baptism, where an atheist would renounce their baptism, usually with the help of a hair dryer, and winter solstice celebrations. There was some ambivalence about the role and affects of rituals. Only 29 % said they felt a sense of community through participating in rituals; just as often they said they found such a sense of community in the secularist meetings themselves. As for the emotional effects of awe, wonder and a sense of belonging to something greater than themselves, only 12.5 % reported feeling such emotions in these rituals.

6.2 A Diversity of Rituals

The rituals and practices we have observed in person and on the internet (through YouTube, for instance) have used meditation and contemplation and, in some cases, art as well as personal sharing in their meetings. This is not something particularly new for a religious humanist group such as Ethical Culture. The Ethical Culture service one of the authors attended included a "colloquium" that opened with taped music by Beethoven and an observed silence for about 5 or 10 min as people sat around a circle. The leader of the group then introduced the topic of pride, asking each participant what he or she was proud of in each of their lives. They shared events or achievements that gave them a source of pride. After that the music came on again, this time Mozart, and another 5 min of silence was held. Some of the participants closed their eyes while others stared off into space. After the leader recounted a story about pride, participants were free to express their further thoughts about the topic before the meeting closed.

A more formal service followed that was based on a talk given by the director of the society on the value of music. But again there were moments of silence interspersed between discussion and announcements. After the service, we found that the event drew a diverse following. Included were both secular humanists and religious humanists as well as one woman who said she espoused a belief in God, noting that at first the old time members had difficulty with such a belief but had grown more tolerant over time. But all agreed that formally religious elements, such as prayer, should have no part in the colloquy and the service.

One should expect these quasi-religious practices at a "religious humanist" group such as Ethical Culture, but the event was very similar to a secular humanist gathering we attended. The leader was introducing meditation practices to the group, again mixed with personal sharing. Periods of silence for meditation were announced with a small Tibetan prayer bowl being sounded. After the silent periods, participants were asked to recount experiences of anger and interpersonal conflict they had felt during the week and how they dealt with these feelings. Both meetings combined secular spiritual practices with a strong therapeutic element.

The rites-of-passage ceremonies suggest that a different dynamic is in play. These rituals are not only intended to unite a group of people together; they also seek to be "effective" in a more specific way. For instance, wedding ceremonies seek to be effective in celebrating the union of two individuals for families and friends while funeral services are largely seen as a source of consolation for the bereaved. Many of the texts used for these rituals in secularist groups are authored by Jane Wilson, a British humanist, although the secular celebrants we interviewed also write their own and draw on texts used by a national secular humanist organization such as the Center for Inquiry.

The ceremonies suggested in these texts follow what can be called a "low church" or informal Protestant style rather than a liturgical one, which is not unusual considering the influence of Unitarian-Universalism in organized secularist history. The funeral service is structured around opening words, followed by thoughts on

life and death, a tribute to the deceased, a simple committal of the remains (usually cremation) and, finally, closing words. These texts show an obvious, strong "this-worldly" quality; funeral ceremony texts, for instance, stress the importance of the deceased having a full and fulfilling life. The particular personal qualities of the deceased take precedence over a general service for the dead. Mourners are asked to look beyond their grief and to celebrate the relationships and contributions of the deceased that will remain. The references to non-theism are clearly stated in most of these funeral texts (Center for Inquiry 2012). As one humanist funeral text plainly states: "Those of us who accept the unity of the natural order, and believe that to die means the end of the conscious personality, look death in the face with honesty, with dignity and with calm" (Center for Inquiry 2012). Thus memory is the central component of secularist funerals, with mourners being asked to remember the deceased during happy times of their lives. Throughout the ritual there is a de-emphasis on intense emotion, with the celebrant balancing mourning with celebration of the deceased's life. The role of literature and poetry should also be noted. All of the samples recommend that celebrants read or play recorded poetry and prose throughout the ceremony, believing that such recitation "can soothe and release pent-up feelings in some people which will help in the long process of grieving" (Wilson 1990).

In a similar way, the wedding ceremonies outlined in the texts are very low church in structure and style. There tends to be more improvisation in wedding ceremony texts, with the secular celebrant program at CFI offering a variety of sample ceremonies that can be used for particular occasions (such as committal ceremonies and same-sex ceremonies). But the ceremonies tend to be structured along the lines of, first, opening thoughts about marriage or partnership—again—reading from literature and particularly poetry on the subject. The vows are then exchanged, with the prompting of the celebrant. The main ritual, besides the exchange of rings, is the lighting of a "unity candle," which symbolizes the sharing of "energy and love" between the couple. The couple is asked to express their love and equal responsibility to each other while they exchange rings. Perhaps somewhat unusual for an atheist ceremony, a CFI sample ceremony text includes a closing American Indian blessing (although without reference to a deity) just before the couple are pronounced married or partnered by the celebrant (Center for Inquiry 2012).

Various dimensions of secularist culture gain potency by standing somewhat apart from the larger society. Yet, insofar as innovations are often easier to institute and find less resistance on the margins, this "standing apart" is a position of opportunity for secularists. The idiosyncratic nature of the services and ceremonies we observed, which are acts of "bricolage" that decouple practices from a traditional context and reinvent them anew without any anxiety regarding authenticity, or linking such practices to traditions in the past, speak to such opportunity. Another opportunity for secularists can be found in large secular gatherings and rallies.

6.3 Solidarity and Secularist Public Events

We argue that secularist gatherings and events also function as rituals because they serve to symbolize unity and strength to both secularists themselves and the wider society. This could be seen at the 2012 Reason Rally in Washington, D.C., said to be one of the largest secularist gatherings in history. As the crowd was filtering into the National Mall, a band fired up the crowd with a rousing song that lampooned the belief in "Jesus coming again," mixing it with sexual innuendo. As the assembled crowd of about 10,000 clapped and sang along to other songs satirizing religion—mainly Christianity—a large costumed puppet figure of Jesus danced among the spectators. "We're not here to bash anyone's faith, but if it happens, it happens," comedian and master of ceremonies Paul Provenza announced to laughter and applause at the outset of the event. The bashing and attacks on religion, mainly Christianity (often in its evangelical and Catholic forms), happened as much—if not more—than positive portrayals of secularism and were in sync with new atheist leader and scientist Richard Dawkins' advice to "mock and ridicule" people's beliefs. When we asked an official from the Secular Students Alliance, a group prominent in organizing the event, about whether the ridiculing of religion was productive, he replied with a nervous laugh that "this is what we do."

Large video screens positioned around the Mall allowed participants to view themselves as part of a significant gathering. The event not only served to physically mobilize secularists in a particular location; it also acted to emotionally liberate and strengthen solidarity among participants in highlighting their common identity, allowing participants to come out and speak out publicly as secularists. 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 secularists, 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 and performance. Despite different opinions, agendas, identities, and interests, then, these freethinkers found a common rallying point, *not within but against.*

Almost every secularist public event we attended commenced with a segment 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." To a casual observer, the tweaking and provocation of religious America might seem to be the least effective strategy for atheists to gain political or cultural acceptance. Yet, aside from their local atheist and secular humanist meetings and cyberspace, there are few venues or spaces for secularists to collectively come together and vent their frustrations and sense of alienation. Humor is an important component of this

venting—both in the freethought culture generally and at the rallies specifically. As a 41-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." As a symbolic affirmation of values, secularist rallies often use humor to render pressing concerns and future desires into a communal experience. Strategically using humor helps constitute public rallies as festive, carnival-like spaces separate from the mundane where secularists can suspend ordinary roles and reality. Within this context, participants are invited to express themselves and collectively mock their adversaries in ways not typically afforded to them in their everyday lives. In this way, rallies act as a mechanism not only for in-group integration but for creating a ritualized space in which challenges to the status quo and symbolic hierarchies can be carried out. Other avenues for secularists' self-legitimation and redefining their position and identity in American society involve commemorations such as Darwin Day.

6.4 Commemorations, Rituals and the Legitimization of Secularism

As organized secularity has expanded the interest in and debate about the importance of rituals, commemorations, celebrations and other observances have become more common. This interest has manifested itself throughout history with numerous attempts to create new holidays, rituals and other rites-of-passage to mark secular events and movements. This can be seen in the French Revolution's architects' attempt to wipe the historical slate clean, abolishing holy days and observances, including the Christian calendar's trajectory originating in Christ's birth. In its place, the inauguration of the revolution was established as year 1, accompanied by a panoply of observances of revolutionary "saints" and commemorations to legitimize and celebrate the new order. Organized secularism, at least in the US, was modeled on a low church Protestantism that generally eschewed observances, not to mention developing a cult of saints and martyrs. Yet as contemporary secularism has sought to provide a community for atheists and compete with theists, there have been several attempts to create secular holidays and commemorations.

Two of the most prominent of these observances have been the winter (and, to a lesser degree, summer) solstice and Darwin Day. Since the solstice celebrations are also shared with Neo-Pagans and New Age practitioners, it is difficult to study many of these events as strictly secularist observances (many atheist and humanist groups list general solstice celebrations that are not strictly secular in makeup). The winter solstice celebrations sponsored by secularist groups are often treated more like holiday celebrations (usually held at a restaurant) for those uncomfortable with Christmas, but show minimal atheist or humanist content. "HumanLight" is another secular alternative to Christmas, celebrating the "humanist values" of tolerance,

compassion, empathy, honesty, free inquiry, reason and rationality. The event was started in New Jersey by the New Jersey Humanist Network in 2001, but does not appear to have spread throughout the secularist community. In a similar way, "Blasphemy Day," which was established both to celebrate freedom of speech and attack religious values, was started by more hard-line atheists and has not been taken up by the softer humanist groups. For this reason, we will focus on Darwin Day as the most prominent secularist commemoration.

6.5 Celebrating Darwin and Science

The celebration of Darwin Day did not naturally evolve as a commemoration on the secularist calendar. Darwin Day was organized by the humanist community at Stanford University in 1995, although there were earlier Darwin celebrations. Massimo Pigliucci, a secular humanist philosopher, also independently initiated an annual Darwin Day at the University of Tennessee in 1997. These commemorations were viewed both as a homage to Darwin and as a celebration of science for the secularist and academic community. A national organization to coordinate Darwin Days began in 2000. The event became more widespread in colleges and universities around the country, which also served to create an important link between academia and secularist organizations. While commemorations generally are aimed at unifying and providing identity to the people or groups celebrating them, our observations of four Darwin Day events in the New York-New Jersey area in 2012, lead us to argue that such observances play a part in legitimizing secularism to a broader public.[1]

"Screw the creationists! We don't care about them. Science has already answered them. This is the day to celebrate science," said Calvin Dane, the director of Long Island's Ethical Humanist Society, when one of the authors asked him why the society's Darwin Day event did not pay much attention to creationism. It was the society's fourth Darwin Day commemoration and, like the others, a scientist was invited to lecture on an aspect of evolution. About 75 to 100 members and visitors filled the society hall as the service commenced with a rap song about Darwin's discovery of evolution. Signs of "Darwin fishes" lined the auditorium. The lecture was a fairly scholarly account of natural selection. The lecturer made no reference to atheism and it was only during the question-and-answer session that someone asked about creationism and its claim that the creation of the eyeball was proof of an intelligent designer. After the lecture, a leader told the assembly that the commemoration was "not about debate but about inclusion. Here everyone can come together over science." After a guitar and vocal rendition of the theme song from the sitcom The Big Bang Theory, everyone was invited to a science fair, as the society's children had set up exhibits and experiments throughout the auditorium.

[1]We would like to thank Ayako Sairenji for her observation of the Darwin Day in New Jersey.

The irenic and innocuous tone of the event seemed planned. In an interview Dane said that Darwin Day is a way that the Ethical Humanist Society reaches out to the community and especially to children. The event always draws visitors and some attendees have become regulars and joined the society.

Even in the more strongly atheistic secular humanist society in New Jersey where we observed another Darwin Day, the tone was more scholarly than polemical. Along with selling Darwin and evolution fishes, the event, attended by 80–100 people, was based around a scholarly lecture by a biologist on the myths and misconceptions of evolution. Interestingly, Darwin was introduced as a "deeply spiritual but not religious" thinker, and there were few criticisms of organized religion.

The question of whether or not Darwin was an atheist and whether or not evolution endorses atheism is part of the broader political and symbolic struggles in the US around the relationship between science and atheism. Atheists like Richard Dawkins and PZ Myers actively promote the view that there is a positive correlation between science and atheism, wherein knowledge and study of the former inevitably leads one to the latter. A more moderate position is expressed by those like Eugenie Scott and Stephen Jay Gould who argue that religion and science necessarily ask and address different questions and aspects of the human condition, and are therefore not necessarily incompatible. Flanking the extreme end of the anti-science, postmodern spectrum is sociologist Steve Fuller who assertively seeks to disavow any link whatsoever (be it historical, social, or cognitive) between science and atheism and propagates the idea that intelligent design is scientifically legitimate (which he argued at the 2005 Dover school board trials no less). And, finally, there are those atheists like Jerry Fodor who challenge and critique certain aspects of Darwin's theory of evolution.

A Darwin Day event held a few days after the event in New Jersey by a secular humanist group on Long Island may have unsettled Charles Darwin himself. The scientist who was scheduled to speak could not make the engagement, and after a brief talk by a member, the meeting morphed into a free-wheeling discussion on evolution and its implications. A man with a Southern accent said that evolution raises more questions than answers and that the "theory is running into dead ends." Another attendee asked with some puzzlement, "What is this fascination with Darwin among secular humanists? Darwin had a big part in [explaining] the structure of the universe and our place in it. We do depend on experts. We have a right to ask how he did it." One of the members shot back in an exasperated tone, "We need a holiday to promote and celebrate science and rational thinking—it's an important way to get together and affirm that." A middle-aged woman turned the discussion to the controversy of teaching evolution and questioned the need to interpret the theory in a non-theistic light: "Why can't we just teach evolution and let people attach their faith to it if they want?" Strangely enough, we later found out that some of those questioning the secularist interpretation of evolution were regulars of the society; the small group had two ministers who attended the events, often playing devil's advocates, while others defined themselves as agnostics (we learned that the secular humanist group had lost its charismatic leader and other members over the years).

In fact, it was only at a Darwin Day event at Hofstra University on Long Island that the strong critique against creationism and even theism that one might expect to hear from secularist organizations was given a major role in the proceedings. The university had sponsored Darwin Day events for a decade, often in a celebratory manner: a sizable cake was served, dramatic presentations were given, and one time a professor dressed up like Darwin (with obligatory mutton chop sideburns). They have included a joint Valentine's and Darwin Day conference on Darwin and sex, and a reenacted debate between Darwin and David Hume and how they would address intelligent design.

The celebrations at Hofstra began when one of the professors was trying to find a way to teach evolution after visiting the Museum of Natural History with students. During this time, another professor heard about the national organization and decided to link up with it to publicize their event. There was no association with the secularist groups that had first inaugurated Darwin Day—it was only after holding the event at Hofstra that the organizers learned that secularists were also commemorating the day. But the 2012 Darwin Day at Hofstra clearly had creationism in its line of fire. The first presentation by a geology professor showed footage from the creationist video *Darwin's Dilemma* and argued that the fossils record used by creationists disproved creationism. Other presentations criticized intelligent design and religion in general as being unscientific. These are fairly standard views found in most science departments at universities. We were, however, struck by the fact that the secularist organizations' celebration of Darwin Day that we observed tended to stress the positive elements of science rather than the negative nature of religion while the university event had a more explicitly anti-religious theme.

A look at the Darwin Day listings for 2012 by the national organization suggests a strong overall academic orientation. The commemorations were either sponsored by a university or by a group such as the Student Secular Alliance, or were special programs of a secularist group featuring a recognized scientist or scholar. The academic pedigree of these commemorations helps enhance Charles Darwin's role as a "secularist saint" among atheists and humanists. Coalescing with the growing academic sponsorship of naturalism, the influence of neo-Darwinism and the "turn to nature" evident in disciplines from psychology to economics creates a growing place for organized secularism in academia and among scientific elites. However, it is actually Darwin's recognition by the wider academic culture and American society more generally that is of most use for secularists in their quest for spreading the good news of science and creating a more positive, populist identity.

6.6 Atheist Individualism and Rituals

American secularists understand ritual differently than their American religious counterparts. What we take away from rituals varies according to what we bring to them. Being a product of such an individualistic culture, secularists in the US bring an overriding concern with remaining independent and free thinking, and one of

their main "collective" activities/activism remains debunking religion and theism. This helps us make sense of a few things. First, it explains American secularists' aversion to the term "spirituality" (and the reason some respondents disliked or disapproved of the term "secular spirituality"). As noted, throughout our survey we had respondents both confirm the positive role of ritual in their lives and deny any spiritual component to such. It also allows us to understand why secularists view personalized and less formal rituals more positively. As a 60-year-old secular humanist from Pittsburg put it, drawing on the herding cat analogy (an analogy that was mentioned more than once by different respondents): "In this cat herd, each will decide his own preference." Often respondents were reluctant to be too specific regarding the whole issue, stating that it is up to each individual to decide for themselves what they need, want, find pleasure in, and if they want to participate in rituals.

"What makes religion distinctive from everything else," argues Randall Collins, is announced in its symbols, which affirm the existence of a sacred realm explicitly higher than mundane life" (Collins 2010, 4). Where religion has historically understood ritual as a means for becoming part of a larger community and transcending "the worldly," secularists understand ritual as a means for celebrating oneself as human and dwelling in a contingent world. For secularists rituals are less about group integration and more about creative meaning-making grounded in an emphasis on the individual. Any community-oriented rituals seem to be largely of secondary importance for secularists. In fact, when we asked about the community-generating nature of rituals, the respondents (when not outright dismissing the need for community) often stressed that their local meetings fulfilled their need for community.

Even the most individualistic of religions still places a sacred figure or text at the center of their rituals, whereas if we wanted to draw a comparison among secularists we could at best maybe point to an intellectual personality or a "canon" of texts (perhaps the writings of new atheists) similar to what one might find in an academic discipline. The comparison to academia is apt given the intellectual and mind-heavy orientation of the culture and the fact that science is the main meaning-structure secularists draw upon to "replace" religion (Smith 2011), even as science is detrimental to meaning-making insofar as it has been one of the main sources of disenchantment (in the name of truth and the search thereof) in the modern world. This disenchanting and demystifying aspect of science is one of the main draws for American secularists, and their fostering of an oppositional culture in a US society that is viewed as religious, irrational, and anti-intellectual. It should also be noted that in terms of activism, secularists are not using science to pursue the truth per se; they are using the authority or cultural power of science to press their claims. In this respect, the issue of whether or not atheism can rightly claim a prominent place in the progress of scientific achievement historically, or presently have a correct view or understanding of Darwin's legacy, is inconsequential. More consequential, in terms of politics, is whether or not such a scientific discourse and narrative can be a strong resource for a more mainstream, popular mobilization in the US. Using the rational authority of science is different than using the moral

authority of God. Religious interests can connect their political motives and goals to God's will. They can also mobilize their constituents more easily due to the inbuilt community ties and a stronger organizational infrastructure (where there are often strong links between individuals rooted in local settings and larger organizations and institutions at the state and national level in the US). Science, at least as a practice, remains open to contestation and revision by its very nature in a way that religion does not. For this reason, using science as a stable cultural resource and an ideological tool for political ends, organizing, and community-building in a country that is still strongly religious and often reluctant to side too strongly with science (especially outside urban centers) is more difficult than using religion, an issue that American secularists, insofar as they have goals beyond the epistemic, will have to continue to address. No doubt knowledge of this matter is in the background of Epstein and Kurtz's call for a more positive atheism, an atheism perhaps informed by science but rooted in a humanistic, universalist ethics.

A de-emphasis on the role of science in secularism can also be found in Alain de Botton's controversial call for secularists to use religion for their own purposes (De Botton 2012). De Botton—who claims that the most boring question you can ask about religion is whether or not the whole thing is true—is concerned with how to adapt or reorient certain aspects of religious ritual tradition without replicating what he sees as problematic in religion, going so far as to suggest an atheists' temple for non-believers to meditate. When asked in an interview why atheists throw away the useful aspects of religion, de Botton had the following to say:

> I think it's because of a great intellectual honesty: I cannot scientifically appreciate God so I'm going to have to leave all that behind. I'm going to have to give up all those benefits because something doesn't make sense. That's a very honest and very brave, lonely decision . . . All sorts of things have become impossible because they seem too religious. There are any number of moments in secular life when atheists say "oh, that's getting a bit religious isn't it." I think we need to relax about approaching some of these areas – they don't belong to religion, religion happened to sit on them. They're for everybody (Lawton 2012.)

Sam Harris—a hard liner, and one of the so-called four horseman of the New Atheism—has come out in defense of the positive aspects and usefulness of meditation as well, stating that one can practice it "without believing anything preposterous about the world." And, like de Botton, he has expressed some frustration with the fact that "many atheists reject such experiences out of hand, as either impossible, or if possible, not worth wanting" simply because of the religious association (Snider 2005; Harris 2007). In expressing such views, de Botton and Harris have faced critiques from fellow non-believers. PZ Myers, in one of the harsher critiques, referred to de Botton as a "fence-sitting parasite" who, in advocating the use of religion, sees "a personal opportunity to pander to the believers" for his own personal gain (Myers 2012). *Free Inquiry* editor Tom Flynn (2005) accused Harris of allowing his ideas to become muddled on account of his use of spiritual language. Flynn and Myers' adherence to a hard-nosed, hard-won rationalism commits them to oppose sociological (read: sympathetic) views of religion and ritual that would rationalize such by pointing out the positive function they serve for the individuals

involved. To point out that there is some deep-seated human need for ritual, or that engaging in such action satisfies psychological needs for participants is little more than religious apologetics for Myers (2011b) and Flynn (2012). As Myers (2011a) assertively argued in a post on Epstein's use of religion as a model to structure atheist meetings: "No gods, no masters, no dogma, and no goddamned priests . . . not even atheist priests."

It is not too surprising to find that the term spirituality or the idea that non-believers should use religion give many atheists pause for concern and incite condemnation. It is going to be a hard sell to convince the majority of atheists that "mysticism is a rational enterprise" (Harris 2004, 221). Spirituality and mysticism carry a negative connotation and are synonymous with religion for many non-believers. In his lecture, "The Problem with Atheism," the same lecture in which he defends spirituality, Harris makes the case for not self-identifying as atheist on account of the negative perceptions attached to it. Such advice significantly downplays the strong, and often primary, identity commitment atheism holds for many secularists. To self-identify as atheist—sometimes at great emotional and social cost—is a meaningful achievement for many, not a default position of indifference, or simply a condition of the absence of belief in a society that is already sufficiently secularized. Non-believers do not have a problem self-identifying as atheists, they have a problem with the fact that self-identifying as such is a problem at all. In fact, it is precisely this strong, personal identity commitment—often archived against traditions and belief systems they were socialized into within a cultural environment where religious belief still tends to be the norm—that leads American secularists to rhetorically valorize reason above all else and defensively rebel against anything that even remotely implies religion, including rituals.

On a second look, however, these public performances and self-secularity rituals clearly show that secularists are interested in more than reason or science. Science in some form or another may inform and play a huge role in secularist practice and culture. This does not, however, mean that individual secularists are not interested in activities and practices beyond science. As our research has shown, secularists are experimenting with or are supportive of a host of experiential and expressive activities—from appreciating music and art to contemplating and experiencing the marvels of nature, from meditating and practicing yoga to expressing one's self through the arts. Such activities do not necessarily compete with their understandings of science and their secularist practice but can actually complement them. For example, at services such as weddings, music is used to set the mood or meditate on the wonders of nature; at rallies, humor is employed in talks, lectures, and mockery; and many respondents pointed to the importance of the arts in their life and activism. Of course, why should this not be the case? Secularists are human after all. The fact that this has to be pointed out speaks to the fact that secularists often suffer from the same one-dimensional stereotypes they are so often accused of perpetuating against religion. Moreover, in looking at the recent literature, it is hard not to come to the conclusion that atheists have spent a far greater deal of time thinking and writing about religion than American religious interests ever have of atheists as a group. Atheists are always imagining what the world looks like from a believer's point of

view. Of course, American non-believers have had no choice but to try to understand religion given how religious the US is; that believers now occasionally are forced to consider the other side within this context speaks to some form of success. Rituals, in spite of rhetoric to the contrary, are an integral part of such success.

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