

Secularism's Place in Politics.  
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The question at hand is, "Does secular humanism have a political agenda?" To address this question, I'd like to first characterize relevant features of what might be called the "secular humanist" community, as distinct from any philosophy of secular humanism, and in so doing reframe the question slightly to focus on secularism and the secular movement. Then, I will define informally what I mean by "political" as this term has numerous meanings and some of those meaning would relate to this question in trivial or distracting ways. My conclusion will not support the idea that secularism has a political component or agenda. Rather, I will propose that secularism is an organizing principle in modern political culture, and that politics are so deeply inherent in secularism that it is always political. Secularism is as political as concepts like "freedom" or "democracy" or "self determination" and should join these and similar basic principles in shaping any progressive political agenda, as well as other non-progressive or even anti-progressive agendas. Indeed, the fact that secularism could work as a guiding principle in otherwise contrasting or opposed political orientations accounts for the recent appointment of a life-long Republican in a key lobbying position in the mostly progressive secular movement. (I refer here to the recent hiring of former Republican advisor and operative Edwina Rogers as Executive Director of the Secular Coalition of America.)

Political or social entities...political parties, public action committees, public interest groups, etc...are often defined by a highly determined and widely understood dogma and are made up of people who often have overlapping involvement with other similar entities, and these entities often find it useful to work together. The Secular Coalition of America (SCA) includes member groups that are self defined as atheist, humanist, skeptic, or free thinking. A fair amount of discussion is spent on the distinctions among these terms and ideologies, and what they mean and don't mean. A skeptic need not be an atheist. A humanist may consider herself to be a "dictionary atheist" (someone who is not a theist) but may be uninvolved in atheist activism. Barry Lynn, the current executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a secular organization, is an ordained minister. Making clear cut distinctions between non-believers, atheist activists, dictionary atheists, skeptics, secular humanists, and just plain science-oriented folk is impossible and ignores the true nature of this collection of overlapping and interactive communities. For this reason, it is valuable and probably necessary to parse "secular humanism" into "secular" and "humanist." In so doing, it is apparent that humanist philosophy and activism is a more narrowly defined entity than secular philosophy simply because between 90 and 100% of those involved in all of these communities mentioned so far are "secular" while only some people self identify primarily as "humanist."

It might be helpful at this point to consider the concept of the "polythetic set" introduced by archaeological theorist David Clarke to help make sense of excavated artifacts. (Polythetic sets are similar to "fuzzy sets" but the former is simpler and more useful here.) In this way of thinking, a set of traits are known to sort out objects. Something can be made of glass, wood, plastic, ceramic, bone, etc. Something can be used for architectural purposes, food processing, energy technology, ritual, etc. Something can be valued folk or elite. A fragment of glass found on an archaeological site could be from a window of an upscale mansion. A fragment of plastic could be from the window of a shanty hut. A piece of ceramic can be from a tobacco pipe used in a Native American ritual, a telegraph line insulator, or a bottle of beer. In thinking of Polythetic sets" there is not a Cartesian relationship between attributes and the identification of an object, nor is there a stable hierarchy (i.e, bone things are always for ritual, glass things are always for architecture, ceramic things are always related to food consumption). Rather, the meaning of a particular trait in determining the identity of an object depends on the other traits and the object itself. Therefore, Barry Lynn. Therefore, Edwina Rogers. Secularism is an idea or principle that can be held by Franciscan nuns and gnu atheists, progressive Democrats and even Republicans. A person who goes to a secular conference or subscribes to a secular magazine is usually but not always imbued with a certain set of traits, while another person is imbued with an entirely different set of traits, yet they recognize each other as members of the same social or political group.

If we think of Secularism as an achievable social norm that some people might prefer and others might abhor, and as a norm that cross cuts a half dozen or so related philosophies, and if we think of "secular" as a measure (some things are more secular than others) and as something that can be ruled in or ruled out by prevailing rules, then it becomes something to fight over. Since secularism is nothing like an esoteric concept, this pretty much makes it a political thing.

Since the originally proposed question did not define "political" I suppose we could spread ourselves thin across a rather mine-filled rhetorical landscape, but I don't think that would get us very far. The panel that led to this collection of essays was populated by individuals who were picked to represent specific views with widely heard-of labels: Libertarian, Republican, progressive, and radical left. So by "political" it is obviously meant political philosophy, political party, and political movement. We can probably examine several political movements, checking to see if "secularism" is in there

somewhere, and not easily find it in several. Secularism is not overtly part of #occupy. One might not see it as an overt part of the environmental movement, currently focused on climate change. Certainly, there are religious people in those #occupy camps, probably some with religious beliefs that determine their own voting pattern. Certainly, there are people who believe that we humans have a spiritual duty to protect the planet, and who consider themselves environmentalists exactly for religious reason.

But if we sorted out current political issues in the US on the basis of the degree to which secularism might be part of them, we immediately find that secularism is central. In the United States, the most talked about domestic issue other than the economy at the time of this writing is probably same sex marriage, which alternates on front page position with women's reproductive rights and health care. While these issues do not inherently demand interrogation from a secularist perspective, they are purely secular issues simply because efforts to limit, keep illegal, or make unconstitutional both same sex marriage and women's personal choice in reproductive health are purely religious initiatives. It turns out that when we look at the aforementioned #occupy and environmental movements there are also religious vs. secular overtones. Based on anecdotal information from friends who are part of our local #occupy campaign, it seems that the usual non-dogmatic religious groups and individuals are involved. There are Unitarians in some of those tents. While the Twin cities is surrounded by evangelical mega-churches, the urban core of Minneapolis is peppered with radical left congregations that engage in politics in part because of a religiously informed sense of moral responsibility. The connection is pretty clear with environmental issues. One of the most significant current threats to having good environmental policy in the US is the effort to limit or distort teaching about climate change in K-12 schools. These anti-climate science efforts are not usually explicitly religious, and are often funded by very secular entities such as Big Oil through non-religious organizations like the libertarian-leaning Heartland Institute. However, the strategy for affecting the nature of K-12 climate science teaching comes right out of the religious right coalition within the Republican Party. "Academic freedom" bills in state legislatures seem to have been introduced to open the door for legislating science curriculum, by some of the same legislators who were busy trying to legislate creationism into the classroom. So the connection between secularism vs. theocracy and climate change denialism is indirect but important. Meanwhile, remember the overlapping communities of secularism, atheism, skepticism, humanism, and plain old science supporters; the same people and organizations who have been fighting creationism, a religious doctrine, are now joined in the battle to fight climate change denialism, and more broadly, science denialism. This is best exemplified by the extension of activities by the National Center for Science Education into issues related to climate change, bringing their mission beyond the purview of evolutionary science. It is all one big mess, and secularism is a key part of the polythetic set of activism that opposes anti-science legislation and policy.

The present political landscape pits religion against secularism as components of the right vs. the left in many areas, even where it is clearly not relevant. Carbon policy is not even a little religious or non-religious except for the small detail of recognizing the reality of hundreds of millions of years of Earth history during which carbon has on average been sequestered, vs. a Biblical view in which this is impossible. Nonetheless, the realities of politics confront secularism squarely. Climate policy is in part a fight over religion, and science education policy is a fight over separation of church and state.

I've recently been involved in a fair amount of party political work for the Minnesota Democratic Farmer Labor party (what Minnesotans call "Democrats"). This has been a very interesting experience for me as I work with many people who are religious, a number of people who probably aren't religious but who feel the need (right or wrong) to "bless this nation" or "thank god for this or that" in campaign speeches, and an even smaller number of individuals who are a-theistic but quiet about it, yet overtly annoyed at the constant reference to faith and blessings by some of our colleagues. This has led me to recognize what I believe is an entrenched "Democratic denialism." People who are in a left-ish party, who are politically progressive, who are in favor of separation of church and state are often religious, if they are traditional Democrats, and if they are not in favor of separation, they are quiet about it. The very fact that there is a sleeping secularism in the progressive movement makes the role of politics among secular activists both important and potent. This should be developed further in forthcoming activists campaigns. Closeted seculars must be given aid and comfort to help them make their views overt and their muttered annoyances louder and clearer.

It need not have been this way. I can imagine that if the history of politics in the United States had been different, the laundry list of positions adhered to and promoted by each of the two major political parties could have been different, and religiosity could have become a virtue of the same party that promoted the environment and what are normally considered socially progressive policies. This has, after all, been the case at other times and places. While modern day American conservatives have very little to say about slave labor resulting from globalization of industry, while the more secular progressives do, it was the equivalent of the religious right (more or less) in the U.K. of the 19th century that fought so valiantly and sometimes effectively against slavery while at the same time denying Darwinism. In present day American politics we see party-line reactionism on both sides of the literal and metaphorical aisle, so what one's position is on a given issue is often determined by the letter next to your candidate's name (D vs. R), and not so much because of an underlying

and consistent philosophy. This is why it is possible, maybe hopeful, that the across-the-aisle plan for lobbying on behalf of secular issues by the SCA may have a chance.

So that is my argument: Secularism is central to many political fights, and a key feature of many political positions, in electoral and activist politics, mainly but not entirely as a reaction to religion having become an organizing principle for the politics of about half the people in the United States. However, the degree to which this needs to be true depends on historical accident as much as philosophy. But historical accident, and not rational and careful thinking, is the primary determinant of our extant political and social landscape.

There is one more point I'd like to make that is of a different form, regarding politics within the secular movement. We are mostly a progressive movement, even though we are also reaching out to more conservative factions, and even though there are plenty of Republicans, Libertarians and other non-Progressives in the movement. But, ironically, many progressive features are not well inculcated into modern secularism and the related communities of atheism and skepticism. In recent weeks, in the time between the Moving Secularism Forward Conference and this writing, we've seen a major event occur. As the outcome of the first Women in Secularism conference, and conversations that happened there, every atheist, secular, and skeptic organization that has conferences or conventions that I can think of has either created an anti-sexual harassment policy, upgraded or modified an existing policy, or dusted off a pre-existing policy to give it more exposure. This is a sign of progressive thinking coming to the fore and, though not without push back, becoming normal. And that is a good thing. But it is also a little surprising that this feminist awakening is coming in the second decade of the 21st millennium. It has been said that feminism is the longest battle ever fought. Feminism was old when Juliet Mitchell called it the longest revolution in 1966. Gloria Steinem has been using this phrase, still accurate, in a recent lecture tour. The overlapping and related communities of Secularism, activist Atheism, and Skepticism are supposed to be thoughtful. It is good that addressing sexism at public gatherings is being done, but it is disconcerting that this has taken so long. Similarly, secularism, atheism and skepticism are mainly white activities. Organizations that explicitly seek to involve existing African American and other non-white groups and to develop new groups in these movements have recently emerged and are forming as we speak, and this is probably the next great dynamic in our shared and overlapping spheres of activity. This is all enigmatically late, but it is, at least, happening.

As promised, I've not spoken about humanism at all, but I will only briefly note that it is a philosophy having a lot to do with social justice, which is political. In modern America, the secularist is required to be not only political, but actively political, and I would even say, aggressively political. Without such a commitment, secularism has little meaning in the current social and political climate. Secular humanism is political or it is nothing.

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