

Secularism in America: A Brief History of Non-Religion Movement

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Introduction

On family, art, education, law, and politics, “culture wars”¹ between religious conservatives and secular progressives in the United States have received a blaze of publicity since the 1980s. Protestant “fundamentalists” have often accused its opponents of “secular humanism,” manifesting their protest against anti-religious modern society, against Godless morality, and against secular politics. Despite their experience of several setbacks such as in Scopes Trial, conservatives still replicate campaigns for their own religious cause.

Meanwhile, secularism in the United States has been becoming a stronger minority movement than ever before.² In 2002, Secular Coalition for America was founded by Atheist Alliance International, Institute for Humanist Studies, Secular Student Alliance, and Secular Web (Internet Infidels), as “the first national lobbying organization representing the interests of atheists, humanists, freethinkers, and Americans”.³ Secularistic organizations are corporate, though are minorities, of powerful political and economic sectors in the United States today. In addition, secularism is already spread and ubiquitous among educated people today. Richard Dawkins, a British biologist known as the author of *Selfish Gene* and *The Blind Watchmaker*, who is also an active atheist,⁴ and the current Humanist chaplain at Harvard University⁵ are only a few examples among many. Moreover, secularism is more and more familiar in our social life. An inter-religious couple may hold a secular wedding ceremony for each other’s pragmatic compromise; their children may choose a non-religious course of life without any—or with more than two—religious backgrounds in their spiritual quest. A BBC documentary program, “A Brief History of Disbelief” has just been brought to public television by the Independent Production Fund on May 4, 2007, with a promotional copy of “the first ever television exploration of the idea that God doesn’t exist”⁶ in the United States.

Historically, secularists have taken a stand against discrimination, sectarianism, and “theocracy” based on religion. They joined “culture wars” not only for their own individual freedom of/from belief, conscience, and life stance, but also against the religionists’ social and political hegemony over civic life of

the rest of U.S. citizens who were supposed to be potential secularists. On the secularists' part, except for several militant groups, its movement has not necessarily attacked the enemies' religious lifestyles or their existence itself, but objected to irrational powers that intruded upon their daily secular lives. It was doubtless that conflicts of systems of thought, worldviews, and means of expression between the two sectors all have heated up the battle.

The following discussion begins with some conceptual problems of secularism in order to bring our subject matters first to doctrinal secularism. Then, a history of American secularism (Ethical Culture movements and of Humanism movements) is to be illustrated as a brief reference to what the secularists actually conducted and contended on Religion. Finally, some social significance of secularism within the cultural and historical settings of the United States is to be considered

I . The Term of “Secularism”

First of all, what does “secularism” stand for? A formalistic distinction between secularism and religionism implies that the whole universe is made out of two realms of meaning—the sacred/the profane, the transcendent/the mundane, etc. Scholars of Religion have devoted to clarify and theorize this idea. However, tautological explanations such that Religion means all-inclusive sets of “religious” thoughts, institutional bodies, and practices, and that the secular signifies anything else of Religion, cannot be coherent. Then, similar substantive definitions of “the religious” or “the secular” should be reserved here. Rather than exclusively defining these terms, it is sufficient for the present to regard certain groups of self-aware people who identify themselves to be non-religious or anti-religious as “secularists,” even though “culture wars” appear on secular—public—battlefields, not on some boundary between the religious and the secular. From a historical viewpoint, therefore, the secularists' purposes, their causes, and the dynamism of interrelationships with the religionists, are to be contextualized within American cultural and social configurations.

The label of “secularism” has positive and negative connotations for both religious conservatives and secular progressives. In a sociological sense, on the one hand, secularists' self-identification is in most cases against existing rival religions and its theistic thought: they are *a*-theists, *in*-fidels, *un*-believers, *a*-gnostics, and *free*-thinkers who are disgusted at God language and sectarianism of particular religions. Religious conservatives conversely attack this lack of faith in God and assure their own spiritual superiority to these “secular folks”. On the other hand, in a historical sense, secularists' positive declaration emerged along with the term “humanism”. In the early twentieth century, American humanism stemmed from a group of modernists who advocated humanism as a non-theistic “religion”. This progressive movement of Religious Humanism had first set out as a sort of affirmative action taken by religious minorities, and then diverged into

moderate humanism and Secular Humanism independently. Its rationalistic creeds, they believed, would be the new “fundamentals” of a humanist religion substituting for the old-time religions. When the early humanists thus aimed to be religiously innovative, the conceptual borderline between the religious and the secular was still obscure.

Having developed particularly within American culture, this kind of doctrinal humanism is supposed to be distinguished from humanitarianism that is held as “universal” value or of secular import. So is the case with secularism. In its legal principle of the First Amendment, for instance, the U.S. government stands as an indifferent secular agent that prohibits any establishment of religion (establishment clause) and guarantees freedom of religious exercises (free exercise clause). However, it is troublesome when freedom *of* religion or belief affirmed by the free exercise clause and secularistic freedom *from* religion or belief affirmed by the establishment clause intersects in humanist religions. In short, religious freedom and secular freedom conflict each other. “Religion of Humanity,” championed by Auguste Comte and inherited by American modernist liberals, bears doctrinal secularism in its ideological character, and raises a complication, “so, is humanism a religion?” Universality of secularism, so far as socially and historically specifiable secularists advocate it, becomes one of many limited and conditioned doctrines.⁷

In the following, let us review some developments of American secularism, exclusively focusing on its conceptual and institutional independence from religious denominations of progressive kind, which have yielded doctrinal secularism since the late nineteenth century. The first example is the American Ethical Union (AEU), and the second the American Humanist Association (AHA), both of which have been active as educational non-profit organizations.⁸

II. Ethical Culture Movement in the United States

Ethical Culture Movement was initiated and nurtured by Felix Adler (1851–1933), a German-born Reform Jew, who founded its first institutional body of New York Society for Ethical Culture in 1876. Adler, a son of a Reform rabbi, once joined Free Religious Association (FRA), which had been founded by progressive Unitarians in 1867.⁹ Adler’s social and educational reform programs¹⁰ were based on a motto, “not by the creed but by the deed”. Ethical Culture initially launched its business as an anti-dogmatism movement but not necessarily anti-religionism:

Believe or disbelieve as ye list—we shall at all times respect every honest conviction. But be one with us where there is nothing to divide—in action. *Diversity in the creed, unanimity in the deed!* This is that practical religion from which none dissents. This is that platform broad enough and solid enough to receive the worshipper and the “infidel.” This is that common ground where we may all grasp hands as brothers, united in mankind’s common cause.¹¹

The dogmatic assertion of religious teachings we hold to be a serious evil, and dogma as such we cannot accept. Its influence in the past has been pernicious, and is so at the present day no less... On the other hand we behold in conscience the root of whatever good religion has achieved, and the law of conscience must suffice to guide and elevate our lives.¹²

American Ethical Union has attempted several revisions of their attitude toward Religion. In 1895, the then leaders of Ethical Societies made a statement that freedom of belief was admissible so long as no public religious exercise was introduced as an expression of such private beliefs, for it would determine the collective character of the movement unilaterally. Sufficient for membership was resolved to be a “serious interest in the moral end.”¹³ In addition, the rising fundamentalism in the first decades of the twentieth century necessitated the Ethical Culture Movement to identify its own distinctive characteristics and to solidify the “ethical” consensus among the society members:

Fundamentalism which is now experiencing an attenuated recrudescence, was at that time in robust possession of the pulpits... It was not, as I have said, that we attacked them, but that they felt themselves obliged to attack us. For the attempt to lead the moral life, or even to try to lead a better moral life, without first accepting religious dogmas was to their way of thinking monstrous... The position of the Ethical Societies connected with ethics the two notes of independence and reverence... The ethical end is the sovereign, supreme end of life to which all other ends must be subordinated. Now fundamentalism attacked the independence of the moral law. The supremacy of it, on the other hand, the reverence due to it, was attacked from another quarter, namely from the side of moral skepticism... Faithfulness, it is conceded, is perhaps better, but with the reservation that it shall last only as long as the relation continues to be agreeable to the individuals concerned... The habits which the experience of the sacredness of binding ties must create have still to be formed.¹⁴

Respectful attitude toward religions, or strong commitment to the ideal of “free religion” seem becoming ambiguous through the course of conflicts with fundamentalism. After Adler’s demise in 1933, the movement grew more active in claiming legal equality for the discriminated, oppressed secularists. Based on the principle of church-state separation and freedom of/from religion, AEU resolutions supported, for instance, conscientious objection for non-theists and opposed any expense of public funds for non-public schools,¹⁵ while the contemporary AEU policy still makes a perplexing use of “religion”.

Life itself inspires religious response: Although awareness of impending death intensifies the human quest for meaning, and lends perspective to all our achievements, the mystery of life itself, the need to belong, to feel connected to the universe, and the desire for celebration and joy, are primary factors motivating human “religious” response.¹⁶

III. Humanism Movement in the United States

American Humanist Association (AHA) has its historical roots in American Unitarianism in the Midwest. In the early twentieth century, Unitarians and academicians devoted their naturalistic faith to Religious Humanism, an intellectual and religious movement whose creed was published as “A Humanist Manifesto” in 1933. The document of the “Manifesto” proclaimed humanism to be a religion of the coming age, and its supporters made themselves known as “humanists”.

... In every field of human activity, the vital movement is now in the direction of a candid and explicit humanism... There is great danger of a final, and we believe fatal, identification of the world religion with doctrines and methods which have lost their significance and which are powerless to solve the problem of human living in the Twentieth Century. Religions have always been means for realizing the highest values of life. Their ends has been accomplished through the interpretation of the total environing situation (theology or world view), the sense of values resulting therefrom (goal or ideal), and the technique (cult) established for realizing the satisfactory life. A change in any of these factors results in alteration of the outward forms of religion. This fact explains the changefulness of religions through the centuries. But through all changes religion itself remains constant in its quest for abiding values, an inseparable feature of human life... Such a vital, fearless, and frank religion capable of furnishing adequate social goals and personal satisfactions may appear to many people as a complete break with the past... To establish such a religion is a major necessity of the present.¹⁷

Added to the humanists’ non-religious or anti-religious conception, the historical movement is to be illustrated here in terms of its personal networks among Unitarian ministers and scholars, as well as its institutional development. The main body in the earliest phase of the humanism movement comprised Western Unitarian Conference, including Meadville Theological School and Chicago Divinity School. Raymond B. Bragg, then secretary of WUC, played a central roll by utilizing his occupational network to assemble the supposed sympathizers and to edit the Manifesto draft weighing up the comments by pros and cons, the number of which amounted to more than sixty persons. Roy Wood Sellars, a philosopher at the University of Michigan, almost solely drafted the document; A. Eustace Haydon, a historian of religions at the University of Chicago, enlisted in the editorial board; and all the thirty-four signers joined the movement, devotedly or nominally, together with John Dewey at Columbia University.¹⁸

The movement of Religious Humanism eventually declined and was alternated with Secular Humanism, which has been advocating scientific and democratic ethics, in exclusively secular terms. In 1941, Religious Humanists founded AHA, of which Bragg assumed the first presidency. In 1950s and 1960s, those Humanists advanced institutional reconstructions; AHA and AEU

cooperated to establish International Humanist and Ethical Union in 1952, and the Humanist-Unitarians organized a group of HUUmanists (Humanists of the Unitarian Universalist Association) in 1962.¹⁹ In 1974, AHA declared “Humanist Manifesto II” as a secular version of the original Manifesto of 1933, in which more anti-religious attitude was explicitly assumed. It did not define humanism as a religion any longer, but reaffirmed it as “an ethical process” instead, just as in the AEU policy language.

As in 1933, humanists still believe that traditional theism, especially faith in the prayer-hearing God, assumed to love and care for persons, to hear and understand their prayers, and to be able to do something about them, is an unproved and outmoded faith... But views that merely reject theism are not equivalent to humanism. They lack commitment to the positive belief in the possibilities of human progress and to the values central to it... Humanism is an ethical process through which we all can move, above and beyond the divisive particulars, heroic personalities, dogmatic creeds, and ritual customs of past religions or their mere negation... They are a design for a secular society on a planetary scale... In the best sense, religion may inspire dedication to the highest ethical ideals. The cultivation of moral devotion and creative imagination is an expression of genuine “spiritual” experience and aspiration... As non-theists, we begin with humans not God, nature not deity... We appreciate the need to preserve the best ethical teachings in the religious traditions of humankind, many of which we share in common... But... No deity will save us; we must save ourselves.²⁰

Along with wiping out its “religious” character and losing its original identity as a renovated religion, AHA humanists declared their public and social concerns accordingly. The second Manifesto claimed more practical and detailed points on “religion”, “ethics”, “the individual”, “democratic society”, “world community”, and “humanity as a whole” than the first Manifesto since it appeared “too optimistic” to its successors of the 1970s.

Traditional religions are surely not the only obstacles to human progress... Although humans undoubtedly need economic and political goals, they also need creative values by which to live.²¹

Paul Kurtz, then editor of the AHA periodical *The Humanist* and drafter of the second Manifesto, before long organized the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal in 1976 and Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism (currently Council for Secular Humanism) in 1980. Kurtz, now a professor emeritus of philosophy at State University of New York at Buffalo, has been an advocate figure of “secular humanism” through the years since then, defining humanism as non-religion to proclaim a lifestyle of “eupraxsophy” (literally means “good practical wisdom”).²²

Conclusion

Common elements between the two lines of secularism movement are recognized in that they, in religious origin, derived from liberal denominations, AEU from Reform Judaism and Unitarianism, AHA from Unitarianism in the Midwest. Dedication to ethical and humanistic revolution of their parental religions finally led them to departing from each denomination in terms of practical and intellectual discords. Differences between the two are also obvious in that there has been room for religious or spiritual language in the AEU group while the self-confessed secularists among the AHA groups have totally omitted the “God” words.²³ Besides these distinct phraseologies on “religion,” nevertheless, both exemplified their social concerns. Adler’s original ideal of ethical religion crystallized as social and educational reform programs, and AHA shifted its standpoint of humanism from religious renovation in 1933 to scientific and democratic ethics in 1974. Both have admitted some moral and psychological functionality of those religions in secular aspects of everyday life, while expressing antipathy toward existing religions’ supernaturalism and sectarianism. It is comprehensible that secularism as the result of emerging intellectual revolution of Bible criticism and Darwinism prevailed over the old-time religious thoughts—it deserves attention that many of the visiting lecturers at New York Society for Ethical Culture were from Columbia University (department of philosophy in particular²⁴), and the participants of the Humanist movement were with a few exception students and scholars of theology, divinity, and (comparative) religion—, but it is also to be noted that such intellectual secularization, even though its proceeding was limited only within academic circles, accompanied socio-cultural circumstances of industrialization, urbanization, and technological developments in the late nineteenth century. AEU and AHA had set out each secular journey with religiously reformative impulse in the beginning, consequently landing on the ground of life-improvement but not of refinement of existing religions. Secularism thus became non-religious alternative way of intellectual and social—especially urban²⁵—life, and this explains the indistinctness of religious life and secularists’ one.

Shared characteristics between secularists and “fundamentalists” are also observed that both movements have manifested dissenting attitudes toward the opposite. This explains the very reason for their mutual resemblance in a way of extreme radicalism. Each camp of “culture wars” is fighting for different causes of “common good,” but it also appears at times for achievement of greater Common Good and Justice for American people, who all love the country.

Notes

1. James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: the Struggle to Define America* (Basic Books, A HarperCollins Publishers, 1991). This article owes its dichotomic ideal types of “religionists” and “secularists” to Hunter. The eccentric expression of “war” might mislead us to focus solely on apparent physical violence such as hospital bombing executed by radically “fundamentalistic” religionists who protest abortion, whereas many prominent conflicts are oftentimes occurring on verbal and virtual arenas.
2. While statistically continual growth of “secularists” in the United States is shown in Hunter, 75–76, and Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism* (New York: Owl Books, 2005), 6–7, it should be noted that those who respond “none” to the questionnaire of public opinion surveys about religious preference are all negatively classified into the denominational remainder.
3. <http://www.secular.org/media/SecularCoalitionBrochure02-07.pdf>
4. cf. Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006); “Is Science a Religion?” *The Humanist* (January/ February 1997), a speech accepting the 1996 Humanist of the Year from the American Humanist Association.
5. David Niiose, “Harvard Humanism: Beyond the Walls of the Secular Cathedral,” *The Humanist* (March/ April 2007). The chaplain G. M. Epstein’s emphasis on the “heart” of humanism as well as the scientific “head” of humanism typifies a newer appeal not only to intellectuals but to “lay” humanists. *Ibid.*, 22.
6. <http://www.abriefhistoryofdisbelief.org/>
7. On the distinction of doctrinal secularism and political secularism, see Heiner Bielefeldt, “The Liberal Concept of Political Secularism,” English abstract of *Muslimen im säkularen Reschsstaat—Intergationschancen durch Religionsfreiheit* (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2003). Since, in this article, the term “secularism” is employed in a broad sense, synonymous with “freethought” and “religious liberalism” as identifying itself with no particular religious or denominational faith, it at times includes variations and complexities of “religious” thoughts and movements. It is hoped that this inappropriate phraseology provokes reconstructing the enclosed category of “religion”.
8. Tax-exempt organizations equal to religious organizations that are automatically applied 501 (c) 3 without any approval of the Internal Revenue Service.
9. Its founding was the result of radical Unitarians’ protest against the phrase “Lord Jesus Christ” in the preamble of the National Conference of Unitarian Churches in 1865. Among the FRA joiners were Unitarians, Universalists, Quakers, Transcendentalists, Spiritualists, and dissented Jews. Adler’s sermon at the Emanu-El Temple entitled “The Judaism of the Future” (October 11, 1873), coincided with an address delivered by O. B. Frothingham, the Unitarian president of FRA, who announced “The Religion of the Future” at the first FRA convention in New York in September 1873. Adler assumed the FRA presidency for a certain time (1878–1882). Stow Persons, *Free Religion: An American Faith* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947); Benny Kraut, *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979), 83.
10. Visiting Nurse Service (1877), Free Kindergarten (1877), Workingman’s School (1880), Tenement House Building Company (1885), and Summer School for Applied Ethics (1891–95), and so forth. cf. Howard B. Radest, *Toward Common Ground: The Story of the*

- Ethical Societies in the United States* (New York: Fieldston Press, Inc., 1969); Horace L. Friess, *Felix Adler and Ethical Culture: Memories and Studies*, ed. Fannia Weingartner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1981); Ellen Salzman-Fiske, "Secular Religion and Social Reform: Felix Adler's Educational Ideas and Programs, 1876-1933" (Ph. D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1999).
11. Felix Adler, "Address of May 15th, 1876, at Standard Hall, New York," *Twenty Years of the Ethical Movement in New York and Other Cities: 1876-1896* (Philadelphia: S. Burns Weston, 1896), 14. Italics are original.
 12. Adler, *Creed and Deed: A Series of Discourses* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1894 [1877]), 61. Together with this collection of Adler's lectures delivered at the New York Society, the same publisher brought out O. B. Frothingham's *Creed and Conduct* in the same year. A strong correspondence between Frothingham and Ethical Culturists is noticed as in "Memorial Exercises in Honor of the Late Octavius B. Frothingham," *Ethical Addresses, 2nd Series* (Philadelphia, S. Burns Weston, 1896), 169-194.
 13. The Leaders Council of the American Ethical Union, "STATEMENT ON RELIGION, 1895" in "A Concept Map for Ethical Culture: Towards Philosophical Consensus" (March 1991) [http://aeu.org/concept_map.html#STATEMENT]. Though not a formal declaration, "A Statement as to the Attitude of the Ethical Movement toward Religion" expressed in 1893 the views of the lecturers of the American Ethical Union: "There are two senses in which the word religion is commonly used. In the one sense it describes a passionate devotion to a supreme cause. In the other sense it is applied to affirmations concerning the connection between man's being and the Universal Being. The ethical movement is a religious movement in the former sense... the ethical movement as such is not a religious movement in the latter sense." *Ethical Addresses and Ethical Record*, 19th Series (Philadelphia: American Ethical Union, 1911), 97.
 14. Adler, "Some Characteristics of the American Ethical Movement," an address delivered in South Place Chapel, London (June 7, 1925) [<http://www.ethicalculture.org/user/adler3.html>].
 15. "AEU Resolutions: from 1948 to the present" [<http://ethicalaction.org/aeuresolutions/index.html>]
 16. "Eight Commitments of Ethical Culture" [<http://aeu.org/8commit.html>].
 17. "A Humanist Manifesto," *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1973), 7-8 [*The New Humanist* 6: 3 (May/June 1933)].
 18. The names of the signers are: J. A. C. F. Auer, E. B. Backus, H. E. Barnes, L. M. Birkhead, R. B. Bragg, E. A. Burt, E. Caldecott, A. J. Carlson, J. Dewey, A. C. Dieffenbach, J. H. Dietrich, B. Fantus, W. Floyd, F. H. Hankins, A. E. Haydon, L. Jones, R. M. Lovett, H. P. Marley, R. L. Mondale, C. F. Potter, J. H. Randall, Jr., C. W. Reese, O. L. Reiser, R. W. Sellars, C. L. Scott, M. Shipley, W. F. Swift, V. T. Thayer, E. C. Vanderlaan, J. Walker, J. J. Weinstein, F. S. C. Wicks, D. R. Williams, and E. H. Wilson. The stories on the birth of the Manifesto are provided by Edwin H. Wilson, *The Genesis of a Humanist Manifesto*, ed. Teresa Maciocha (Amherst, New York: Humanist Press, 1995) and William F. Schulz, *Making the Manifesto: The Birth of Religious Humanism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2002). On a prehistory of American Religious Humanism led by John H. Dietrich, Curtis W. Reese, Charles F. Potter, see Mason Olds, *Religious Humanism in America: Dietrich, Reese, and Potter* (University Press of America, 1978). On the historical development of Midwestern and American Unitarianism and the emergence of humanists within, see Charles H. Lyttle, *Freedom Moves West: A History of the Western*

- Unitarian Conference, 1852–1952* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1952).
19. Founded in Yellow Springs, Ohio, as The Fellowship of Religious Humanists affiliated with AHA and Unitarian and Universalist Association. The HUManists that publishes its periodical *Religious Humanism* is probably the only exception for the decline of “religious” humanism.
 20. “Humanist Manifesto II” *Humanist Manifestos I and II*, ed. Paul Kurtz (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1973), 13–16 [*The New Humanist* 33: 5 (September/ October 1973)].
 21. Ibid.
 22. Paul Kurtz, *Living Without Religion: Eupraxsophy* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, 1994). This strategy to define humanism as non-religion may seem to be a preventive measure against “fundamentalists” attack on that secular humanism is to break the principle of church-state separation when teaching Darwinism at public schools if it identifies itself as a religion.
 23. Hunter mentions the AHA and the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism as representing organizations of “secularists”, with the name of the National Service Conference of the American Ethical Union (founded 1929), but not the AEU. Hunter, 329n17.
 24. cf. Stephen P. Weldon, “The Academy and the Pulpit: 1930s-style Humanism at Columbia University,” *Religious Humanism* 32, nos. 1 and 2 (winter/spring 1998), 29–50.
 25. Local Ethical and Humanist Societies have been located disproportionately in East and West megalopolis and the Midwest.