



ACCEPTANCE, REASON, LOVE:

A guide to Openly Secular Allyship



Acceptance, Reason, Love: A Guide to Openly Secular Allyship
Copyright © 2014 Openly Secular. Some Rights Reserved.

Content written by Lori L. Fazzino, M.A., University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Graphic design by Sarah Hamilton, www.smfhamilton.com

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International.
More information is available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Openly Secular grants permission for all non-commercial uses, including reproduction, distribution, and adaptation, with proper credit to Openly Secular and provides others with the same rights.



ABOUT THE OPENLY SECULAR CAMPAIGN

Openly Secular is a coalition project that promotes tolerance and equality of people regardless of their belief systems. Founded in 2013, the Openly Secular Coalition is led by four organizations - Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, and Stiefel Freethought Foundation. This campaign is also joined by national partner organizations from the secular movement as well as organizations that are allies to our cause.

OUR MISSION

The mission of Openly Secular is to eliminate discrimination and increase acceptance by getting secular people - including atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists and nonreligious people - to be open about their beliefs.



OVERVIEW

The moral world of American culture is dominated by Christian thinking, which stops secular people from fully participating in civic life. Religion is believed to be necessary to be a moral person, and being a religiously-moral person is necessary for being a good American; when secular individuals reject religion, people believe that they are rejecting the basis for moral solidarity. Stereotypes of atheists as dangerous, immoral, anti-Americans generates atheophobia, justifies further anti-secular bigotry, and leads to moral exclusion. Moral exclusion occurs when individuals and/or groups “are perceived outside the boundary in which moral values, rules, and considerations of fairness apply.”

– Lori L. Fazzino, Sociologist and Secular Activist

All across America, there are people who self-identify as atheist, humanist, agnostic, or any number of nontheistic worldviews who experience bigotry. They are stopped from running for political office in seven states, frequently vandalized as decals representing their secular beliefs are ripped off their vehicles or billboards advertising secular communities

or programs are defaced, many have been denied citizenship on the basis of religious belief, or have been turned away when trying to volunteer or offering goods and service to those in need.

These are not the daily experiences of most secular individuals because as a whole, secular people comprise an invisible minority. Because holding secular beliefs is easy to hide, and people are often scared to express their actual views to the general public. This is not to say that secular people don't experience bigotry and discrimination – they do, but it goes largely unnoticed. Intolerance towards secular people is complicated to explain due to the many variables at play. The complex practice of secular oppression stems from long held cultural ideas that results in fear and intimidation by people who claim to have a moral advantage. This causes secular people to essentially become invisible in their societies.

Feelings of secular intimidation come from many places - prior experiences that have happened first hand to secular people or those close to them, publicized mistreatment of other secular individuals, and atheophobic public opinions.

Atheophobia is the fear and loathing of atheists that pervades American culture. Like Islamophobia and Anti-semitism, Atheophobia is driven by misinformation, and manifested as expressions of anti-secular intolerance.

Anti-secular intolerance has become so widespread that it is part of the structure of our society. Institutions have put policies in place that make it socially acceptable to oppress secular people. Those policies are implemented in a variety of ways. Expressions of bigotry towards secular people - such as denial of their humanity, failure to take them seriously, denial of political and social equality, and assertion of religious dominance through Christian privilege, aims at keeping secular individuals silent. When openly secular people try to exercise their rights as American citizens, they have all too often received the message that freedom and liberty don't extend to those outside of the religious status quo.

Recent Findings from the 2013 Freedom of Thought Report

Prisoners at a detention center in South Carolina were denied **all** reading materials except for the **Christian Bible**.

An Oklahoma teen plead guilty to drunk driving. The judge sentenced him to **10 years** in either **prison** or **church** - his choice.

80 Soldiers at US Army's Ft. Eustis were punished with punitive maintenance work for refusing to attend the base-endorsed "Commanding General's Spiritual Fitness" Christian rock concert.

A Mississippi high school reportedly held a **mandatory** religious service that promoted **Christianity** to the students.

The United States Army Chief of Chaplains **denies** soldiers the right to be listed as "Humanist" in official personal records and military identification tags.

CONTENTS

Welcome	8
NO SOUP (kitchen volunteering) FOR YOU!	9
What is an Ally?	10
From Privilege to Allyship	12
Self-Reflection: Could This Have Been My Daughter?	13
Glossary of Secular Identities	14
Misinformation About Secular Individuals	15
Ten Common Myths About Secular Individuals	17
Openly Secular Allyship	19
Ways to be a Strong Openly Secular Ally	20
Christian Privilege and the Everyday Impact of Christian Hegemony	21
28 Examples of Christian Privilege	22
Tactics of Resistance	24
What Atheists and Believers Can Learn From Each Other	25

WELCOME

Thank you for taking the time to read this toolkit! **Openly Secular Allyship** is an invitation and opportunity for people of faith to stand up in support of secular acceptance. Through education, we empower people of faith to advocate for the end of anti-secular intolerance in their home, workplace, and community.

The secular community cannot achieve equality and inclusion in society without support from compassionate allies with the courage and conviction to strive for a common good - people like you! We know that there are lots of barriers that may keep people from getting involved, and that's why we're here. This toolkit is the first step to getting past them.

QUESTIONS OR CONCERNS?

Having concerns is completely normal and we anticipate that you'll have some. We have developed a variety of resources that are available for download at **OpenlySecular.org** to resolve your questions and concerns to the best of our ability.

A WORD ON LANGUAGE

For the purpose of this campaign, the word *secular* includes all nontheistic traditions. People who generally express their lack of belief in a god are often lumped into one big group, but that is a misperception. Philosophical differences exist within various brands of nonbelief, much like theological differences among the various denominations of one faith tradition.

ONE FINAL WORD

Openly Secular Allyship isn't about proving which side is "right" or "wrong." It's about initiating conversations and using active listening to build a bridge between secular and non-secular people. We hope to establish a common ground, built on a foundation of shared values, on which relationships can grow stronger or be built anew.

"Both tolerance and respect are empty virtues until we actually understand whatever it is we are supposed to be tolerating or respecting."

- Dr. Stephen Prothero, Religious Scholar

NO SOUP (KITCHEN VOLUNTEERING) FOR YOU!

In October 2013, the group *Upstate Atheists* from Spartanburg, New York made local headlines when they were denied the opportunity to volunteer at a local soup kitchen. The soup kitchen's executive director went on record stating that she would resign from her position before she would be a "disservice to [this] community" and allow an atheist group to volunteer. Members of *Upstate Atheists* were not interested in self-promotion and offered not to wear their group tee-shirts or tell anybody who they were affiliated with – they simply wanted to help out.

According to the executive director, "This is a ministry to serve God. We stand on the principles of God. Do they (atheists) think that our guests are so ignorant that they don't know what an atheist is? Why are they targeting us? They don't give any money. I wouldn't want their money."

Upstate Atheists devised a creative solution to the problem – they organized across from the soup kitchen and handed out 300 care packages to the

homeless. Having cultivated a strong culture of service, the members of *Upstate Atheists* are no strangers to working with local and national non-profit organizations. Since forming in 2011, the Spartanburg Soup Kitchen is the only non-profit to turn them away.

The Spartanburg soup kitchen was on the news again, two weeks later, when Steven Rhodes, the pastor who founded in the ministry 30 years prior, responded:

Every person has faith and values - different, but no less real to the one who lives by them. So here is what I believe we need to remember as a community. First, that we are one "common humanity"...Two, no matter our orientation regarding religion and science, compassion is necessary for every community to exist and thrive. Christians choose to believe these things are a calling from God. Others do them for different reasons...The Reformed and Presbyterian heritage of my congregation...informs me that our day-to-day calling is to live out our faith and values, whatever they are, in community with and for all people.

Well said, Pastor Rhodes, well said.

WHAT IS AN ALLY?

Throughout history oppressed groups have faced unfair treatment, hostility, violence, and other forms of discrimination. People who are targeted need support from others who are not targeted this way. An ally is a member of a dominant identity group who uses their privilege to help end oppression through support of, and as an advocate for the oppressed population.

Qualities of an Ally

1. Recognizes one's own privilege as a member of the dominant group.
2. Is able to acknowledge patterns of oppression that operate in one's life and can draw parallels to the same pattern in the target group.
3. Has worked to develop an understanding of a target group and their needs.
4. Chooses to align with the target group and respond to their needs.
5. Is committed to personal growth required to promote social change.
6. Knows that one has a clear responsibility to fight oppression whether or not persons in the targeted group chose to respond.
7. Does not attempt to convince target group that one is on their side. Shows support through actions, not words.
8. Is conscious of concepts such as cultural imperialism and cultural appropriation.
9. Confronts oppressive jokes, slurs, and actions. Knows that silence may communicate condoning of an oppressive statement.

What is Privilege?

In the context of how social groups relate to each other, privilege happens because of social hierarchies and power dynamics. Privilege is not a right or a deserved entitlement; it is an unearned advantage or benefit enjoyed by an individual or a group who is at the top of the social hierarchy. Receiving this type of privilege relies on prejudicial and discriminatory norms, attitudes and practices.

The “normalization of privilege” implies that members of society are judged, and succeed or fail, measured against characteristics that are held by those who are privileged. The privileged characteristic becomes the norm. Those who stand outside these norms are regarded as “*other*” - see chart below.

Privileged Groups	Marginalized Groups
Men	Women
Men/Women	Transgender/Transsexual
Whites	People of Color
Middle Class/Wealthy	Working Class/Poor
Heterosexuals	Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Queer People
Christians	Non-Christian Believers/Secular People
Able-Bodied People	People with Disabilities
(Young) Adults	Children/Seniors

FROM PRIVILEGE TO ALLYSHIP

Becoming an ally is a process. Take time to think about the process outlined below and about where you are and where you would like to be.

Step One: Be Aware

Who are you? Understanding your viewpoint and its origins in gender, religion, ethnicity, race, physical and emotional abilities, class, etc., is critical to understanding your relationship to others, to ideas, and to events.

Step Two: Educate Yourself

Learning about others is the next important step in becoming an ally. Challenge yourself to learn about persons, cultures, and groups that you do not identify with. It is only by learning about others that you can stand with and for them in the face of oppression. The knowledge you gain will enable you to be accountable to the persons for whom you are an ally.

Step Three: Gain the Skills

In order to be an effective ally, you need to develop skills to communicate the knowledge you have gained about yourself and others. This may seem frightening

at first, since it involves taking steps towards action. Research venues where you can practice the skills needed to become an ally. In other words, find a safe, non-judgmental environment where you can talk about the community you are allied with and the issues they face.

Step Four: Take Action

It is only through participation that we become involved in ending oppression in our communities. Yes, it is challenging. Yes, it can be frightening. However, if we keep our knowledge, thoughts, skills, and awareness to ourselves, we deprive others not only of our own gifts, but of a life of richness and equality. Share your knowledge.



For more information on learning to be an ally for people from diverse backgrounds, visit the Community Tool Box at:
ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/culture/cultural-competence/be-an-ally/main



SELF-REFLECTION: COULD THIS HAVE BEEN MY DAUGHTER?

Social media has become an arena for religious discussion, debate, and downright vitriol. Anonymous comments can be made and left for others to find without the demands or accountability of face-to-face interaction. Imagine, for a moment, stumbling upon a Facebook page or Twitter feed filled with hateful and threatening comments such as “I’m gonna drop an anchor on your face!” or “#thatbitchisgoingtohell and Satan is gonna rape her!!!” How might a person react if those comments were written about a complete stranger? About one’s friend? About one’s family? Mark Ahlquist, a firefighter and engaged community member in Cranston, Rhode Island, did not have to imagine how he might react. These comments, and a slew of other equally damning ones, were directed at his teenage daughter, Jessica.

Jessica was a student at Cranston High School where a Christian prayer banner has hung in the west auditorium since 1963. In July 2010, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) contacted the Cranston School District asking for the banner’s removal, citing the display as a violation of the Establishment Clause Amendment I in the Constitution which states: *Government shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, prohibiting Congress from favoring one religion over another.* The school board denied this

request and in April 2011, the ACLU filed a lawsuit against the Cranston School District in Rhode Island on behalf of the Ahlquist family.

In January 2012, the United States District Court for the District of Rhode Island made their ruling on 840 F. Supp. 2d 507 - Dist. Court, D. Rhode Island [2012], Ahlquist v. Cranston in favor of Mark Ahlquist. The school district removed the banner a few months later and agreed to pay the ACLU’s \$150,000 legal fees. Although the school district decided not to appeal the rule, town residents were outraged. Sixteen-year-old Jessica and her family became the focal point of that outrage. They were harassed by students, community members, and even elected state officials. The day after the initial ruling was made, Representative Peter Palumbo (R) publically called Jessica an ‘evil little thing’ on local talk radio. Others publicly denounced her, calling her names like ‘witch’ and ‘little snot.’

The Ahlquist’s family home was vandalized and Jessica was repeatedly threatened with bodily harm, often needing a police escort to and from school. She was perceived and typified as a walking personification of evil and remains a prominent target for cyber-bullying, and is continually vilified on the Internet. Much of the contempt stemmed from her actions against the overt religious symbolism in her public high school, and from the label she had given herself: ‘atheist.’

GLOSSARY OF SECULAR IDENTITIES

Agnostic: A person who does not have a definite belief about whether or not God exists.

Atheist: A disbelief in the existence of a deity; the doctrine that there is no deity.

Freethinker: A term that means an individual who eschews religious dogma and scripture in making decisions about what they choose to believe and what worldview they choose to accept.

Humanist: An individual who embraces human reason, ethics, and social justice, while specifically rejecting religious dogma as the basis of morality and decision-making.

Naturalist: Someone who subscribes to a philosophical position that all that exists is natural phenomena.

Nontheist: An individual who does not identify as a theist. They are not necessarily without religious belief, but do not adhere to any organized definition of theism.

Nones: The term “nones” refers to the growing segment of the population who claim no religious affiliation.

Secular: Secular denotes those things which are not concerned with or connected with religion.

Spiritual, but not Religious: Those who don't identify with a particular faith (or non-faith) tradition, but are interested in learning more about other faiths and their own sense of spirituality.

Skeptic: Individuals who use the scientific method and reason to evaluate claims about the supernatural.



“...those of us who are gnostic or agnostic atheists, humanists, secularists, or any other sort of non-believer know that our lives can be rich and fulfilling. We get joy from beholding the grandeur of the universe, and we find the deepest meaning in the faces of those whom we love and who love us. Enjoying the wonders of science, literature, the arts, and every other human accomplishment, we find our niche within the human community and lead lives of meaning and purpose... It is the reality of life that is good without God — existence that is meaningful not in spite of the fact that we are non-believers but because of it.”

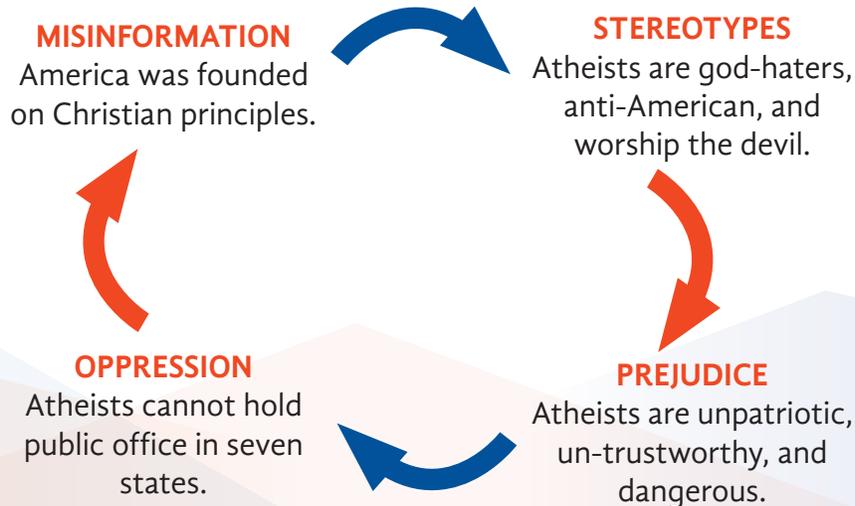
- Chris Johnson, Harvard Humanist Community

MISINFORMATION ABOUT SECULAR INDIVIDUALS

The cycle of misinformation goes something like this: People are given misinformation, from which unjust stereotypes are formed. Prejudicial attitudes are reinforced by unjust stereotypes, which provide rationale for discrimination of the group that the public is misinformed about. This cycle is illustrated in the figure below, using the misinformation that America was founded on Christian principles. Article eleven of the Treaty of Tripoli (1796) states:

“As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion...”

CYCLE OF MISINFORMATION



The dissemination of misinformation relies on tools of fear – rhetorical techniques found in our overarching cultural frames and everyday narratives that are used to create a loathed and/or feared “Other.” Fear tactics that have been used against secular people includes:

- 🌀 **Dualism:** Rhetoric that divides the world into “good” and “evil.”
- 🌀 **Apocalyptic Aggression:** Rhetoric that creates a sense of impending confrontation between the forces of “good” and “evil” that will irrevocably change the world forever.
- 🌀 Demonization: Rhetoric that depicts a particular group as the very personification of evil.
- 🌀 **Scapegoating:** Rhetoric that wrongfully blames another group for a particular problem.
- 🌀 **Moral Panics:** Rhetoric amplifying a manufactured or minimal social problem, creating wide-spread panic among citizens.

A clear example that incorporated all of these tactics is the McCarthyism of the 1950s.

- 🌀 1950s McCarthyism created what is commonly known today as the **Red Scare** (**moral panic**).
- 🌀 “**Godless communism**” was a growing threat (**demonization**).
- 🌀 Billy Graham portrayed communism as a **Satanic anti-Christian** religion, which could only be defeated through **Christian salvation** (**dualism**).
- 🌀 America **could not survive** without the Bible (**apocalyptic aggression**).
- 🌀 Activist efforts and liberal education created an **anti-communist backlash** against groups of **atheists, humanists, African Americans, women, and intellectuals** (**scapegoating**).

The use of these tactics have been widely successful and are responsible for the common myths people have about secular individuals and the discrimination they face because of misinformation.

TEN COMMON MYTHS ABOUT SECULAR INDIVIDUALS

This list of ten common myths is not comprehensive, but it is a strong representative sample of the misconceptions people associate with secular people.

MYTH: Secular people are angry at god and just angry in general.

Fact: Secular individuals don't believe in a god, so they can't be mad at a god. Some secular people are angry about religion and what happens on account of religious beliefs, but that is different from being angry at a god.

MYTH: Secular people wish to convert people away from religion.

Fact: Secularism is not something that people can be converted to. It is a personal decision that takes a lot of thought and consideration. Although many secular people would like to see more acceptance of secularism and discussion of religion, this does not necessarily mean that they wish everyone to be secular. Many simply wish to coexist with the religious and be accepted for who they are.

MYTH: Secular people live empty, unfulfilled lives.

Fact: Secular individuals have lots of things in life that make them happy and fulfilled: friends, family, sports, love, helping make the world a better place, learning new things, etc. The list could go on and on, and in almost every place it overlaps with what makes religious people happy, too.

MYTH: Secular people have no morals.

Fact: Secular individuals are typically just as moral as theists. Secular people, like theists, derive their morals from many different areas including philosophy, role models, experience, family, etc. Typically the only disagreement is over the use of scripture and religious dogma as the basis of morality. Beyond that, secular people and theists can (and do) typically agree on many aspects of morality and what it means to be a good person.

MYTH: Secular people are arrogant.

Fact: Some secular people are arrogant. Some religious people are arrogant. The truth is that some people are arrogant. Most secular people find the claims of religion unconvincing and are willing to calmly explain why. This is honesty, not arrogance.

MYTH: Secular people don't know what it feels like to believe.

Fact: Many secular people were religious at one point in their lives, and therefore have most likely experienced religious feelings. The significance and level of truth that a person attaches to those feelings, however, typically differs between seculars and theists. Secular people typically recognize that these feelings can be significant and meaningful, but they see them as emanating from their brain, not from a god. Many of us experience the same emotions we once did from religion by contemplating the universe or looking at stars in the sky.

MYTH: Secular people have nothing to live for.

Fact: Secular people have lots to live for, most of which religious people would also say they live for. They live to enjoy the company of the people they like/love. They live to satisfy their curiosity by learning about the world. They live to experience new things and to take in the wonders of reality.

MYTH: Secular people are the reason misfortune befalls America.

Fact: There is no evidence to support this position. Bad decisions that result in damaging effects on the

United States (or the world) are made by a lot of people of all religions. However, scapegoating is an effective tactic for creating an out-group. This is why the idea that secular people are at fault for America's woes is especially worrisome. It contributes greatly to the notion that, no matter how kind or charitable, secular people are the enemy.

MYTH: Secular people think all religious people are stupid.

Fact: There have been many intelligent religious thinkers throughout history. Sir Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, and Johannes Kepler are great examples. However, most secular people think they were wrong about the existence of god. Even brilliant people can be wrong and there is a very large difference between thinking someone is wrong regarding a single issue and thinking they're stupid.

MYTH: Nontheism is a phase the secular person will grow out of.

Fact: 20% of the overall U.S. population identifies as nonreligious, which refutes the idea that atheism is a product of youth.

OPENLY SECULAR ALLYSHIP

In a 2014 Pew study, atheists were given the “cold shoulder” by Americans who rated them very unfavorably, resulting in a very chilly “temperature” rating of 40 degrees. One of the key findings is that “knowing someone from a religious group is linked with having relatively more positive views of that group... Atheists receive a neutral rating of 50, on average, from people who say they personally know an atheist, but they receive a cold rating of 29 from those who do not know an atheist.” This gives us hope that a brighter future for the secular community is achievable.

Fostering Solidarity

“Nobody should think that it is morally correct to belittle someone for their beliefs or non-beliefs. I’m a human, you’re a human, let us go eat pizza!” - Karen C.

The key component to fostering solidarity between believers and secular people is removal of perceived threat. Secular individuals, and atheists in particular,

are perceived as posing a threat to dominant group values. As we’ve shown by the information provided in this guide, this threat has been manufactured and is largely imagined. For example, Humanism explicitly expresses the value placed on democracy and support of democratic societies, namely because of their promise for an environment with an established social order. Undoubtedly, there will always be diversity among people in any group – just consider the denominational splits Christianity has experienced.

An effective way for non-secular and secular people to traverse the boundaries between them is by:

1. Focusing on mutual sharing of essential humanity.
2. Focusing on commonalities between groups’ histories and/or present situations.
3. Emphasizing common national identity – i.e.,
4. Being proud Americans.
5. Establishing common ground by ignoring the differences between religion/ worldview beliefs while stressing the shared basic values and morals.

WAYS TO BE A STRONG OPENLY SECULAR ALLY

- 1** I familiarize myself with common myths and misconceptions about secular people.
- 2** I familiar myself with the realities of living openly secular, both in the U.S. and globally.
- 3** I approach each conversation with a secular person with the goal of establishing common ground.
- 4** I speak out against anti-secular bigotry and other forms of religious intolerance in my workplace, place of worship, community, and home.
- 5** I am inclusive of all secular people.
- 6** I don't make assumptions about someone's secular identity.
- 7** I am not dismissive of the emotions and feelings secular people have, especially their anger.
- 8** I do not, nor do I allow others to, make broad generalizations about secular people based on a few who come across as angry and/or loud.
- 9** I recognize my privileges and prejudices as a non-secular person.
- 10** I do not expose anyone as secular unless they explicitly give me permission to.
- 11** I understand why it's important to be an ally.
- 12** I do not use religious terminology (e.g., fundamentalist) to describe secular people or their worldviews.
- 13** I build friendships with people in the secular community.
- 14** I recognize my other privileged identities and act as an ally for secular people with corresponding non-privileged identities (e.g., White, Christian males can be allies to the whole of the community, but especially to secular women of color).
- 15** I do not assume that someone is secular because they are depressed, unhappy, or suffered abuse in their lifetime.
- 16** I do not try to "win" arguments, nor do I try and force anyone to live by my moral code.
- 17** I ask sincere questions and listen with genuine interest.

CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE AND THE EVERYDAY IMPACT OF CHRISTIAN HEGEMONY

Christian dominance operates not only through the use of force, but also through the normalization of a culture in which everyday examples of Christianity are pervasive, unquestioned, and often not recognized as such.

What is Christian Hegemony?

Christian hegemony is the everyday, pervasive, and systematic set of Christian values, and the beliefs of individuals and institutions that dominate all aspects of our society through the social, political, economic, and cultural power they wield. Nothing is unaffected by it, including our personal beliefs and values, our relationships to other people and to the natural environment, and our public policy. Dominant Christianity provides a worldview - an intellectual framework, a language, and a set of values - that is promoted as unchallengeable, common sense, and the way the world works.

The interpersonal effects include specific acts of discrimination, harassment, and violence directed at those who are not Christian or who are Christian of the wrong sort - e.g. Muslims or people who are LGBTQ. The institutional effects show up in the ways that the policies, practices, and procedures of the health care, educational,

and criminal/legal systems favor Christians and Christian values and treat those who are not Christian as abnormal, dangerous, and outside society's circle of caring. The interweaving and cumulative impact of Christian dominance in our institutions creates an overall structure that is dense, ever-present, and devastating to our society. Christian hegemony benefits Christians, those raised Christian, and those passing as Christian.

No living Christian created the system of Christian hegemony that we live within. In that sense no one is guilty. But Christians are responsible for their response to this system, and for the way that they act as allies in the struggle to build a just society. All of us, Christian or not, who are working to create a world without hate, exploitation and violence must identify the internalization of Christian ideology in our thinking, and eliminate its negative effects from our behavior. In addition, we must learn effective techniques for educating people about Christian hegemony and for organizing to challenge its power.

Finally, we must free ourselves from the restraints it has imposed upon our imaginations, so that we can establish relationships with ourselves, other people, and living things built on values of mutuality, cooperation, sustainability, and interdependence with all life.

28 EXAMPLES OF CHRISTIAN PRIVILEGE

How do you rate?

1. I hear music on the radio and watch specials on television that celebrate the holidays of my religion.
2. I can be sure that my holy day (Sunday) is taken into account when states pass laws and when retail stores decide their hours.
3. I can assume that I will not have to work or go to school on my significant religious holidays.
4. I can be financially successful and not have people attribute that to the greed of my religious group.
5. I can be sure that when I am taught about the history of civilization, I am shown people of my religion who made it what it is.
6. I do not need to educate my children to be aware of religious persecution for their own daily physical and emotional protection.
7. I can write an article about Christian privilege without putting my own religion on trial.
8. My religious group gives me little fear about ignoring the perspectives and powers of people of other religions.
9. I do not need to worry about the ramifications of disclosing my religious identity to others.
10. I can easily find academic courses and institutions that give attention only to people of my religion.
11. I can worry about religious privilege without being seen as self-interested or self-seeking.
12. I know that when my children make holiday crafts, they will bring home artistic symbols of the Christian religion (e.g., Easter bunny, Christmas tree).
13. I am never asked to speak for all the people of my religious group.
14. I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my religion most of the time.

15. I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a “credit to my religion” or being singled out as being different from other members of my religious group.
16. I can, if I wish to, safely identify as Christian without fear of repercussions or prejudice because of my religious identity.
17. I know my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence and importance of the Christian religion.
18. I can protect my children from people who are religiously different from them.
19. I can have a “Jesus is Lord” bumper sticker or Ichthus (Christian fish) on my car and not worry about someone vandalizing my car because of it.
20. I can buy foods (e.g., in grocery store, at restaurants) that fall within the scope of the rules of my religious group.
21. I can travel and be sure to find a comparable place of worship when away from my home community.
22. I know that if I need legal or medical help, my religion will not work against me.
23. I know that when I hear someone in the media talking about g-d that they are talking about my (the Christian) g-d.
24. I can be fairly sure that if I ask to talk to the “person in charge,” I will be facing a person of my religion.
25. I know that that people are knowledgeable about the holidays in my religion and will greet me with the appropriate holiday greeting (e.g., Merry Christmas).
26. I can remain oblivious to the language and customs of other religious groups without feeling any penalty for lack of interest and/or knowledge.
27. I can display a Christmas tree and/or hang holly leaves in my home without worry about my home being vandalized because of my religious identification.

TACTICS OF RESISTANCE

Tactic	What It Is	What It Sounds Like
Denial	Denial of the reality of religious pluralism.	This isn't Christian, this is just how America is.
Deflection	Deflects privilege by arguing that if people choose not to assimilate, they simply have to put up with dominant standards.	They can't expect the dominant culture to change. We are a Christian nation – majority rules.
Rationalization	Ignores religious nature of a holiday, ritual, symbol, etc. by trying to overly- secularize it.	There's nothing wrong with hanging Christmas lights. Christmas is a secular holiday.
Intellectualization	Ignores secular worldviews by assuming everybody has some sort of transcendent worldview.	Everybody believes in something divine. Christianity is just one way we seek meaning in our lives.
Principium	The "my way is the only way" argument. Doesn't acknowledge other's choices of differing or nonbelief.	Salvation through Jesus is the only way to get into Heaven.
False Envy	Ignoring privilege under the auspices of defending one's faith against the perceived attack of others.	It's Christians who are oppressed. Atheists are attacking our religious liberties.
Minimization	Ignores the prevalence and effect of Christian hegemony by assuming a level playing field.	They have the same chance to practice their religion as I do.
Benevolence	Asserts religious superiority by subtly implying a perception that secular beliefs are deficient.	We should welcome atheists. After all, they are God's creation too.

WHAT ATHEISTS AND BELIEVERS CAN LEARN FROM EACH OTHER



As an atheist, I believe that dialogue with people who have an opposing worldview is necessary for me to alter my prejudices, and strengthen my beliefs. I'm personally indebted to the religious people I've met over the past

couple of years, whose confidence, thoughtfulness, and respect have helped me open myself up to the seriousness of faith, without making me feel like they're trying to convert me. Maybe that's what people fear from religious dialogue: that it's pretense for conversion.

But it really isn't that way, at least at least it hasn't been for me - and I hope that the people who are reading this now can be inspired to reach out to those with different worldviews. Atheists and believers have so much to learn from each other, and I've found that we're not so different from one

another after all. We're all human beings whose lives are spent struggling to make meaning out of chaos. For people of faith, God - however they may define it - provides ultimate meaning. For atheists, our ultimate meaning rests in something different, but its still of a transcendent nature - reason and science.

Either way, I will never forget the first time I had a conversation with someone who is now one of my best friends. His opinion on everything from art, pop culture, philosophy, and love is one that I respect more than perhaps anyone I know. The fact that he's a Christian actually adds to this deep, abiding respect. But when we first conversed on the subject of religion, we both felt pretty defensive. We assumed, based on past experiences, that the other person's opinion on faith was based on ignorance of our own viewpoint.

His interactions with many atheists and Christians left him feeling alienated, because his Christian faith also requires a certain amount of skepticism, and - as he told me much later - it offers little consolation.

He also didn't feel like atheists really understood what it meant for him to identify as a Christian. At the same time, my experience of many atheists and Christians left me feeling alienated, because my atheism requires a certain amount of faith. See where this is going?

Reflecting back on our first conversation, I realized that two "opposing" parties can't enter into a dialogue, unless they're willing to be honest about the fallibility of their beliefs. If I were a militant atheist, and my Christian friends were fundamentalists, then there would be no way that we could find common ground. But the fact is, most people aren't Christopher Hitchens or Pat Robertson. And most people are open to other people's ideas (thank goodness).

I have a couple Christian friends who I pester with questions like, "Why do you consider yourself a Christian? What does God mean to you? Can you define that word for me? What is the fundamental difference between the two of us, do you think?" Each time, I get a thoughtful answer. Sometimes

it satisfies my curiosity for the moment, and sometimes it just leaves me with more questions. But I never walk away from that Q&A (wow, they're patient) feeling like they're jerking me around or lying to themselves. It's not because they've provided me with brilliant answers or anything, though they usually do - its because the questions I ask aren't rhetorical.

Unlike some people who pose questions to the "opposition" simply to get a chance to reveal their ignorance to them, I often ask questions to my Christian friends because I know that they'll be able to illuminate me. But it doesn't always come across that way. The questions I've asked my best friend, who I'm a lot more comfortable with, can seem like thinly-veiled condescension at times (and of course we butt heads!), but our intellectual squabbles have shown me another benefit of dialogue. By "keeping at it" I've definitely learned how to better navigate these conversations.

Atheists and believers have so much to learn from each other. Maybe I'm a "heathen," but I'm also a

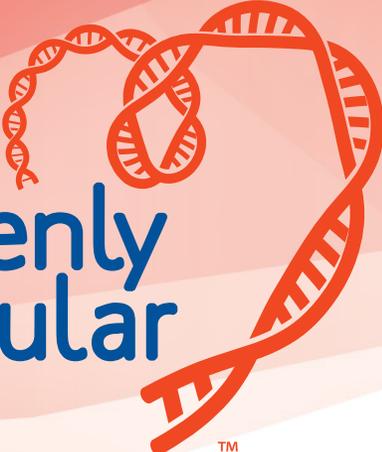
member of the human race and I've learned that faith and belief are part of my condition. I am not without faith. Mine just looks different, and right now it isn't being subjected to misdirected scientific scrutiny. I've also learned to appreciate the Western religious heritage which I take part in as a member of American society. There isn't a single belief I have that isn't somehow colored by the Christianity I was raised with, or by the greater cultural history that Western religion is largely responsible for. Most atheists who were born here are culturally more Christian than we care to admit.

On the flipside, Christians can learn a lot of things from atheists- mainly skepticism of that heritage. (Indeed, contemporary Christian thought would be nothing without the critiques of atheists like Nietzsche, Marx and Freud.) Sometimes we have to question the past, and that includes the Bible as canon. Whose canon? Classics don't become classics simply because they appeal to some universal human truth. Texts and values are written, reviewed, published, and disseminated by

very particular people- people with power and an agenda. I'm not just an atheist in the sense that I don't believe in an anthropomorphic God. I'm also deeply skeptical of the system I've been thrown into, and that I have little choice but to take part in. In the end those differences matter less than what we have in common. Shared meaning, or a shared search for meaning. How different would our debates look if we could agree to that? Would we have debates at all, or would our questions be based on a real interest in knowing and appreciating the perspective of the other? I think so. Hats off to my thoughtful, brilliant friends for giving me that.

Mariann Devlin is a reporter for Patch.com, blogger at the In Our Own Words - Salon for Queers & Co. blog, and volunteer contributor to Streetwise magazine, a publication dedicated to ending homelessness.

Source: inourwordsblog.com/2012/03/20/6846



**Openly
Secular**

*Opening Minds,
Changing Hearts™*

Openly Secular

PO Box 2371

Columbus, OH 43216

Email: info@openlysecular.org

www.openlysecular.org