



**BEING OPENLY  
SECULAR DURING  
THE HOLIDAYS**





*Being Openly Secular During the Holidays*

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## 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.



# CONTENTS

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Tis The Season   | 6  |
| Is Every Day an Atheist Holiday?                                       | 6  |
| Managing Holiday Stress  | 7  |
| Fidelity vs. Faith, or Nonbelievers at the Holidays                    | 8  |
| To Celebrate or Not To Celebrate?                                      | 9  |
| How My Non-Jewish, Atheist Husband Helps Celebrate the Jewish Holidays | 10 |
| Coping with Religious Family over the Holidays                         | 11 |
| Opening Up at the Holidays   | 11 |
| Planning Ahead   | 12 |
| During the Visit   | 13 |
| Celebrating the Holidays, Secular Style                                | 14 |
| Additional Resources   | 15 |

## TIS THE SEASON

Holidays are a time of joy and celebration, but for people with secular beliefs, they can be a particularly awkward time of year. As an important part of social life, they reinforce communal bonds, allow traditions to be upheld and reinvented, and remind us of what's important in life. The rituals people engage in, such as exchanging a gift on Christmas Eve, or helping to prepare the Passover meal, sustain and strengthen the deep emotional bonds between our loved ones. Regardless of your ethnic heritage and cultural background, holidays are a source of meaning that reminds us who we are and where we come from. Therein lies a dilemma for those who don't adhere to a faith tradition. All around us are celebrations in the making - centered around beliefs that we don't share. What's a nonbeliever to do? Many of us struggle with how to react to and participate in holiday celebrations.

### Holiday stress and anxiety are largely due to:

-  Forced participation in religious rituals
-  Fear that sharing secular beliefs will upset others
-  Worry that negative reactions from others will elicit painful emotions in themselves

The purpose of this booklet is to help you approach the holidays from a secular perspective. Instead of hiding your secular beliefs, we've provided information on how to reconcile conflicting feelings about the holidays, including tips for talking about nonbelief during the holidays.

## IS EVERY DAY AN ATHEIST HOLIDAY?

Penn Jillette famously claims that every day is an atheist holiday. The word "holiday" means "holy day". The word "holy" is typically tied to religion, but can also refer to the sacred. A "holy day" is one worthy of devotion. This is why holidays are regarded as times set aside for celebration.

How is every day an atheist holiday? Depending on your particular secular worldview, you likely don't believe in an afterlife. For most of us, life is sacred because our time here is limited and there are no second chances. Each day can be seen as a "holy day" because it brings a new opportunity to celebrate life with joy, express your love to friends and family, and enact values that can make the world a better place.

# MANAGING HOLIDAY STRESS

The holidays can be stressful for everyone to some extent. For those who actively participate in holiday celebrations, shopping preparations and family events can be overwhelming. Many people feel out-of-sync with the hustle and bustle of the season. Those who do not celebrate Christmas or Hanukkah may feel excluded or imposed upon.

A person who has recently suffered a loss, trauma, or illness may find it difficult to carry on the usual traditions. Even the most well-intentioned reunions can induce tensions, fights, and miscommunications. Whatever your situation, there are many proactive choices you can make to deal with holiday stress and blues. **Here are some strategies:**

## Acknowledge Intense Feelings

Give yourself permission to feel depressed, angry, sad or lonely. Cope with these feelings through talking, exercising, and writing. Avoid situations that stress or upset you.

If you feel obligated to attend a gathering where you feel uncomfortable, plan to stay a short time. While those around you may be overindulging in food or drink, you can make conscious choices about whether or how much to consume.

## Get Support!

Try not to isolate yourself completely. To avoid loneliness, plan to be with friends or volunteer in your community to help those less fortunate than yourself. If you're far from your loved ones, use the phone. Start traditions of your own that feel comfortable to you.

## Don't Overlook Your Own Needs

Have fun. Expose yourself to humor. Give at a level that feels comfortable to you (in terms of time, money and energy). Prioritize your time; don't overwhelm yourself with too much to do. Even though this is a time of "giving to others," give yourself plenty of self-care and attention, including rest and quiet time.



## FIDELITY VS. FAITH, OR NONBELIEVERS AT THE HOLIDAYS

Some atheists just don't do Christmas. People, after all, vary in their tastes. For some, it just isn't their thing. Maybe they were Christian once and now feel weird about the holiday. Maybe they have family-induced issues that turn them off from the holiday. Fact is, though, that most atheists and other nonbelievers continue to celebrate the holiday, often with great gusto. And some Christians choose to get mad, because after all Jesus is the Reason for the Season, and the secularization of Christmas has led to consumerism and selfishness and gay marriage and who knows what other horrors.

Jesus isn't the Reason for the Season, and never was. As we nonbelievers like to point out, over and over, our words falling on largely deaf ears, Christmas is way older than the particular body of myths that adhered to the Man from Judea. To rework a line from Bono, Christians stole Christmas from the pagans, and we're stealing it back.

Comte-Sponville makes, in *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*, a distinction between Faith and Fidelity. Faith is a blind, unreasoned acceptance of something as being true. Fidelity is an adherence to a tradition

or set of traditions - think of it as membership in a culture. You agree to certain principles, values, you name it. You have fidelity towards them. It isn't faith because adherence to them can be a reasoned thing.

For many people, they hear "atheist" and they don't just hear a rejection of faith, they hear a rejection of fidelity to the culture as a whole. The two are conflated, and in most cultures, have long been so in popular thinking. To question God was to question the King. Heck, in ancient cultures they often made it more direct, and made the King a god! But faith and fidelity don't have to go hand in hand. Fidelity can exist without faith and vice versa.

Why do so many atheists celebrate Christmas with such gusto and cheer? Or for that matter, celebrate other holidays like Halloween or Thanksgiving in the United States? Because we may not have faith, but we do have fidelity. We like our culture. We grew up in it, we're attached to it. Celebrating Christmas is one of the ways that we celebrate that fact. Christmas is part of who we are - the carols, the food, the pretty lights and the Christmas trees. So we celebrate and have fun. We may have thrown out the baby Jesus (except for the carols, many of us love those), but we haven't thrown out the bath water.

## TO CELEBRATE OR NOT TO CELEBRATE?

Family expectations to engage in religious practices can cause a great deal of anxiety. Straying from tradition may seem difficult, especially when family expectations are high.

Regardless of religious or secular beliefs, for most people the holidays involve some understanding that we should be celebrating something very special.

Traditions are an important part of the human experience. Perhaps that's why so many "nones" keep to their traditions when the holidays come around. Of the 20% of people who are religiously unaffiliated:

88%

celebrate Christmas

73%

decorate a holiday tree

68%

consider Christmas to be a cultural holiday

Amplifying the holiday's cultural elements will allow you to focus on meaning without affirming religious beliefs. For example, if you're asked to pray and don't feel comfortable declining, give thanks from your heart with your own secular interpretation, like this grace by humanist writer Nicolas Walter.

### A Secular Grace

For what we are about to receive let us be truly thankful

...to those who planted the crops

...to those who cultivated the fields

...to those who gathered the harvest.

For what we are about to receive

let us be truly thankful

to those who prepared it, and those who served it.

In this festivity let us remember too

those who have no festivity

those who cannot share this plenty

those whose lives are more affected than our own

by war, oppression, and exploitation

those who are hungry, sick and cold

In sharing this meal

let us be truly thankful

for the good things we have

for the warm hospitality

and for this good company.



## HOW MY NON-JEWISH, ATHEIST HUSBAND HELPS CELEBRATE THE JEWISH HOLIDAYS

Bill and I are approaching our eighth wedding anniversary. We have two small children, Samantha and Daniel. We are raising them Jewish, and we belong to a Conservative synagogue. Although Bill is a confirmed atheist, he identifies strongly with Jewish culture and over the years has gained a true appreciation for the importance of Jewish rituals and values. He has also learned a tremendous amount about Jewish customs and holidays and feels very comfortable explaining to people that we are a Jewish family. Happily for me, he has found many ways to comfortably participate and play an important role in our Jewish holidays and celebrations.

At Hanukkah each year, Bill is usually the one who makes our latkes (fried potato pancakes), and since we have had children, Bill is generally the one who prepares our contribution to my family's Passover Seder. When I reflect on my upbringing,

my parents' roles were very traditional. My father was our family's Jewish educator and the leader of our Seder. He took this responsibility very seriously and has been a true role model for me. My mother cooked and orchestrated delicious and beautifully presented meals at the holidays and for Shabbat (Sabbath) dinner. In my mind and in my heart, my mother's contributions were no less important than my father's. Food and meals are a crucial and significant part of all of our Jewish customs and celebrations. I feel strongly that when Bill cooks during our holidays, it is his way of participating, and it is a contribution that should be appreciated.

While Bill may not be celebrating the day God rested after a hard week of work, he is certainly celebrating the day he and I can relax with each other and the kids after our busy week of work and obligations. And that feels just perfect to me.

Written by Staci K. Full article available at:

[www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/rosh\\_hashanah\\_and\\_yom\\_kippur/How\\_My\\_Non-Jewish\\_Atheist\\_Husband\\_Helps\\_Celebrate\\_the\\_Jewish\\_Holidays.shtml](http://www.interfaithfamily.com/holidays/rosh_hashanah_and_yom_kippur/How_My_Non-Jewish_Atheist_Husband_Helps_Celebrate_the_Jewish_Holidays.shtml)

## COPING WITH RELIGIOUS FAMILY OVER THE HOLIDAYS

At this time of year it's hard to avoid reconciling religious differences you have with your family. Holiday times can be very uncomfortable if you are a "reclaimer" (reclaiming your life after being religious) from a religious household where other family members are still devout. Here are a few guidelines that might be helpful.

**Keep a journal.** This can help you sort through jumbled thoughts and emotions, stay on track with how you are trying to handle things, take care of yourself, and learn.

**Plan ahead.** It helps a great deal to approach the holidays with a high level of consciousness. What do you expect it might be like? What experiences have you had so far with your family? Sometimes reclaimers simply avoid going home in order to avoid conflict. At times this is the only healthy course of action.

**Decide how open you will be.** Holiday time puts pressure on your relationships, and could raise the question of how much you want to share.

## OPENING UP AT THE HOLIDAYS

If you decide to open up during a holiday visit, remember that the holidays can be very stressful. Here are a few tips for opening up:

- 🌀 Choose a supportive person to open up to
- 🌀 Take extra caution with deciding on the timing
- 🌀 Give family/friends some time to process your news
- 🌀 Have resources for family members to read so that they can see how others have worked through this issue



More information and resources aimed at specific audiences are available at:

[openlysecular.org/toolkits](https://openlysecular.org/toolkits)

## PLANNING AHEAD

It's important to remember that being secular is nothing to feel ashamed of, nor are you responsible for other people's feelings about it. Although some secular people may choose not to attend family holiday functions, most of us want to spend holidays with loved ones, ideally without discord due to our secular beliefs. Here are four tips to prepare for yourself for the festivities.

**Set Realistic Expectations.** If you think about your family's patterns of behavior, you can probably predict how your visit will go. Setting realistic expectations means that you think about what your ideal visit would look like, and then compare that idea to the likely reality, based on previous experiences. You can alter your own behavior but remember that you can't control others' behavior.

**Develop Boundaries.** All healthy relationships have boundaries. The boundaries may be looser for families member, meaning we're willing to tolerate more from them, but there is a limit. Before your visit, determine what you are willing to tolerate (e.g., going to midnight mass), what is unacceptable (e.g., intentional derogatory remarks about your secular beliefs), and what actions you will take if necessary (e.g., end the visit prematurely).

**Communication.** Communicate with your family as early and as clearly as possible, especially if you are planning not to attend or cutting your visit short. Be upfront about your concerns, expectations, and boundaries, and ask them about their expectations for you during the visit.

**Self Care and Support.** Taking care of yourself prior to the visit will help you maintain emotional control during your visit. Work on mindfulness strategies, reach out to support networks, and make plans for secular celebrations either before or after your visit. If possible, make sure you have at least one person who you can call during your visit for support.

## DURING THE VISIT

Talking about matters of faith and our secular beliefs with loved ones requires sensitivity, honesty and straightforwardness. Below are tips for managing your interactions and conversations during holiday family gatherings.

**Maintain your values.** Regardless of what is happening, do what you want to do because that is what you have decided. Reclaim your holiday. Remember why you decided to make the visit. Do what brings you and others joy and meaning.

**Find common ground.** Instead of focusing on your ideological differences, amplify the areas of commonality. For example, if you and your dad like football, spend time watching and talking about the game on Thanksgiving. If you and your mom usually do the cooking, start compiling recipes to try out and share before your visit.

**Embrace the true meaning of the holidays.** The holidays are great opportunities for us to show others that it's possible to have a deep, meaningful, ethical life without religion. The values embraced by most people during the winter holiday season – peace, joy, the importance of family, charity, and goodwill towards humankind – are enacted all year long by secularists who desire to make the world a better place.

## ADDITIONAL SUGGESTIONS FOR NAVIGATING THE HOLIDAYS

-  Bring a friend
-  Take time for yourself
-  Politely disengage
-  Accept difference
-  Practice patience, compassion, and gratitude
-  Know when to end the conversation

## CELEBRATING THE HOLIDAYS, SECULAR STYLE

People all over the world celebrate in different ways and for different reasons. You don't have to celebrate the holidays for the same reasons as your religious family members. Living openly actually gives you more personal freedom in choosing what to celebrate and how to do so.

### AUTUMN

9/15: Int'l Day of Democracy  
 9/19: Talk Like a Pirate Day  
 9/21: Autumn Equinox  
 9/21: Int'l Day of Peace  
 9/23: Banned Book Week  
 9/30: Int'l Blasphemy Rights Day  
**October is Freethought Month**  
 10/11: National Coming Out Day  
 10/12: Freethought Day  
 10/15: Nietzsche's Birthday  
 10/23: Mole Day  
 11/9: Carl Sagan Day  
 11/21: Voltaire's Birthday  
 11/24: Evolution Day

### SPRING

3/8: International Women's Day  
 3/14: Pi Day  
 3/16: Freedom of Information Day  
 3/16-3/22: Sunshine Week  
 3/21: Spring Equinox  
 4/1: April Fool's Day  
 4/12: Cosmonaut's Day  
 4/22: Earth Day  
**1st Thursday in May:  
 National Day of Reason**  
 5/25: Geek Pride Day

### WINTER

12/10: Int'l Human Rights Day  
 12/21: Winter Solstice  
 12/23: Festivus  
 12/23: HumanLight Celebration  
 12/25: Newtonmas  
 (Newton's birthday)  
**January is New Year Reality Revival**  
 1/16: Religious Freedom Day  
 1/29: Thomas Paine Day  
 2/12: Darwin Day

### SUMMER

**June is LGBT Pride Month**  
 6/5: World Environment Day  
 6/6: Atheist Pride Day  
 6/21: World Humanist Day  
 6/21: Summer Solstice  
 7/1: Chevalier de la Barre  
 7/4: Indivisible Day  
 7/11: Ingersoll Day

Many people intermix traditional family holidays with newer secular celebrations from which new traditions and rituals arise. In the end, you will have to decide what is right for you.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

### Books

Arias, Oscar. *The Easter Bunny Isn't Real...and Neither is Jesus: The Pagan Origins of Easter and the Invention of Jesus*. Mental Milk Press.

[www.mentalmilk.com](http://www.mentalmilk.com)

Harvie, Robin and Stephanie Meyers. *The Atheist's Guide to Christmas*. HarperCollins.

Jillette, Penn. *Everyday is an Atheist Holiday*. Penguin Group.

### Blogs

@HappiestAtheist. "Atheist Holiday Survival Guide."  
<http://happiestatheist.blogspot.com/2012/12/holiday-survival-guide.html>

Blag Hag. "Atheist Holiday Traditions."  
<http://www.blaghag.com/2009/12/atheist-holiday-traditions.html>

### Select Articles

Altnet. "Seven Reasons for Atheists to Celebrate the Holidays."

[http://www.altnet.org/story/144685/7\\_reasons\\_for\\_atheists\\_to\\_celebrate\\_the\\_holidays](http://www.altnet.org/story/144685/7_reasons_for_atheists_to_celebrate_the_holidays)

American Humanist Association. "HumanLight: A Holiday for Humanists."

<http://americanhumanist.org/HNN/details/2011-12-humanlight-a-holiday-for-humanists>

American Humanist Association. "How to Celebrate HumanLight."

<http://americanhumanist.org/HNN/details/2012-12-how-to-celebrate-humanlight-a-december-holiday-for-h>

CNN. Holidays, minus God.

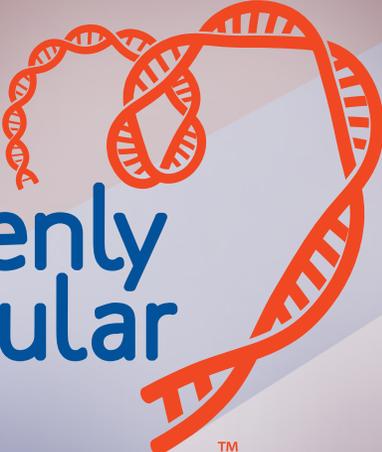
<http://www.cnn.com/SPECIALS/atheist.holidays.irpt>

NPR. HumanLight: December's Secular Holiday."

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=98627236>

Slate. "No Reason for the Season: The Joy of Celebrating a Godless Christmas."

[http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2008/12/no\\_reason\\_for\\_the\\_season.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/faithbased/2008/12/no_reason_for_the_season.html)



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Changing Hearts*™

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