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## Introduction

What would happen to a high school senior deep in the bible belt of the United States if they told their high school administrators that they would contact the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) if the school had a prayer at his high school graduation? This isn't a hypothetical scenario – it happened in 2011. Damon Fowler, a senior at Bastrop High School in Louisiana, informed the superintendent of the school district that he knew school-sponsored prayer was illegal and that he would contact the ACLU if the school went ahead with a planned, school-sponsored prayer at the graduation ceremony. Damon's threat was leaked to the public. What followed were death threats from community members and fellow students, weeks of harassment, and eventually his parents disowning him and kicking him out of their home.

One more thing happened, which is why we recount this story at the beginning of this book on organized secularism: the secular community came together to support Damon. As his story made its way into the local, national, and eventually international press, nonreligious<sup>1</sup> and/or secular individuals made offers of a place to stay, protection, and transportation, and a college fund was set up for Damon since his parents had cut him off financially. Various secular organizations explicitly offered Damon help. The Freedom From Religion Foundation gave him a \$1,000 college scholarship and other organizations volunteered to help him legally.

Damon's story should be surprising in a country that prides itself as a melting pot of races, ethnicities, cultures, and religions. Yet, it is also a not entirely uncommon scenario in the United States, where atheists' morality is esteemed at about the same level as is rapists' (Gervais, Shariff, and Norenzayan 2011) and only about 50% of Americans would vote for an atheist for President (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Damon's story also serves to highlight several important characteristics of the organized, secular community in the US. First, perhaps to the surprise of many Americans, there actually is an organized secular community in the US. While the numbers are still quite small (see below) relative to the total proportion of the US population that is nonreligious, those involved in the community are not insignificant. Second, the response of the organized secular community to Damon's situation also illustrates that organized secular-

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<sup>1</sup> Many people use the terms non-religious and secular interchangeably, but scholars continue to debate their precise meaning.

ism in the US is often reactive. Many of the formal organizations exist specifically because they are reacting to the privileging of religion in American culture and the law (Blumenfeld, Joshi, and Fairchild 2008; Schlosser 2003). Likewise, many of these organizations spring into action precisely when religious privilege moves from the abstract or implicit into the concrete and blatant, undermining the rights of secular individuals. Third, secular organizations in the US share a common goal: to normalize nonreligiosity. In other words, the aim of many of these organizations is to make it so people who are not religious, whether they are atheists,<sup>2</sup> agnostics,<sup>3</sup> or those who are unaffiliated with any religion, can live ordinary lives without fear of unequal and discriminatory treatment. While in many ways Damon Fowler's story is a tragedy – a failure of public schools to follow the law and protect minorities and a tragic failure of parental support – his story also helps delineate the characteristics of organized secularism.

Before we go much further, we should be clear in what we mean by “organized secularism.” The term “secular” originated to distinguish the things of this world (e.g., work, food, sex) from religious things (e.g., prayer, heaven, god). Secular can most simply be defined as “not religious” (though how we determine what is religious and what isn’t remains a matter of debate). “Secularism,” in its primary meaning, is a theory, philosophy, or ideology that distinguishes the secular from other (usually religious) phenomena.<sup>4</sup> In its most common use, secularism refers to a political philosophy that there should be a separation between religions and government (Berlinerblau 2013). The logic behind such a separation is that, when government and religion are intertwined, typically there is favoritism toward certain religions and therefore implicit or explicit discrimination against other religions and those with no religion. Secularism can and does manifest itself in many ways around the world, from French laïcité (Bowen 2013), to Turkey’s unique restrictions on Islam despite being a predominantly Muslim country (Hurd 2013), to the supposed “wall of separation” that exists in the US (Smith 2013). Regardless of the particular manifestation of secularism, the idea remains that the safest way to manage religiously pluralistic populations is with a government that is separate and distinct from religion.

Secularism in the sense described above is a neutral term. Over time, however, partly in reaction to cultural and/or state resistance to such neutrality, sec-

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<sup>2</sup> By “atheist” we mean those who do not have a belief in a god.

<sup>3</sup> By “agnostic” we mean those who do not believe there is any way to gain knowledge about a god.

<sup>4</sup> See the Oxford Dictionary of Atheism for more detailed discussion of these and related definitions.

ularism has acquired a second, more ideological meaning: not just the separation of religious and non-religious phenomena, but the celebration and promotion of the secular as a worldview or value system that is the functional equivalent of religion. Secularism, then, is what nonreligious people believe and practice. Just as religion comes in a variety of different flavors such as Christianity, Hinduism, or Islam, there are different kinds of secularism including Humanism, Atheism, and Freethinkers. And just as religious people tend to see their particular worldview as the truth, or at least the most sensible way to live, so do secular people. The difference is that secularism, at least in the United States, is a minority worldview. It is secularism in this second sense that is of interest in this volume.

By combining “secularism” with “organized,” we are making explicit reference to the many ways that individuals have come together around one common interest – their shared desire to celebrate that they are not religious and find ways to normalize their nonreligiosity. Specific aims of secular organizations may vary (see Chapter 7, Schutz), as some bring secular individuals together to socialize and others gather for educational purposes or for political action. But all secular organizations in the US have at least one shared goal: the normalizing of nonreligion in the US (Cragun 2015b). Thus, by “organized secularism” we are referring to groups of people who have some sense of togetherness and are organized around their shared desire to be openly and safely secular in the US. All of the chapters in this volume relate to organized secularism in this sense, though how individual authors define secularism varies slightly and is explained in those chapters.

As just noted, organized secularism takes many forms – from regular meetings in bars to discuss philosophy to secular parenting groups and charitable organizations. While Damon Fowler’s story illustrates how organized secular groups in the US can come together, there is another side to organized secularism in the US. Many of the now prominent, national secular organizations have been around for decades, and their relationships with other prominent secular organizations have not always been amicable (see Chapter 4, Fazzino and Cragun). There is a long and somewhat sordid history of infighting, competing over donors, splintering, and tension among these organizations (see Chapter 3, Rechtenwald). Perhaps still the most well-known leader of a secular organization in the US – at least among a certain generation of Americans – was Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who for a period in the 1980s was billed as “the most hated woman in America” (O’Hair and O’Hair 1991). O’Hair gained fame (and notoriety) for her involvement in a court case, *Murray vs. Curlett* (later combined with *Abington School District v. Schempp*), which banned school official led Bible reading in public schools. O’Hair later created several organizations to fight for the

rights of atheists and other nonreligious Americans. O’Hair literally disappeared from the organized secularism movement when she was abducted by an employee, along with one of her sons and a granddaughter, extorted for money she had raised through her secular organizations, and then murdered along with her son and granddaughter (LeBeau 2003). Yet her legacy lives on in the secular organization she founded, American Atheists, which is widely known as the secular organization that places prominent billboards espousing secular values around Christmas, among other provocative actions. Several chapters in this volume (Chapter 2, Richter; Chapter 3, Rectenwald, and Chapter 4, Fazzino and Cragun) provide detailed information on the tensions that have existed among secular organizations since the term “secular” was first coined in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The goal of this volume is to address a lacuna in the scholarly study of organized secularism. While organized secularism in its various forms is close to 200 years old, to date there is very little social scientific research on the topic, though there is a growing body of historical research (Hecht 2004; Jacoby 2005; Royle 1980; Warren 1966). The aim of this volume is to expand early efforts to theorize the discussion of organized secularism (see Campbell 1971), from organizational theory to social movement and social identity theory, as well as to present fresh empirical data. We hope the various chapters in this volume further our understanding of this growing and important movement.

Organized secularism has gained more visibility in recent years, but it is difficult to put actual numbers on its growth. While surveys show the nonreligious population has grown significantly in the last two decades (Pew Forum on Religion 2014), many secular individuals do not join organizations (see Chapter 9, Langston et al.). To date, there is no nationally representative survey with a large enough sample of nonreligious individuals that has asked whether such individuals are part of a secular organization. The closest thing there may be to this is a question asked by the Pew Forum on Religion in a 2012 survey which asked survey participants how important it is for them to belong to a community of people who share their beliefs and values; 49% of the nonreligious said it was very important (Pew Forum on Religion 2012). If we overlay that number onto the nonreligious population in the US (which was the population of interest in that Pew survey), that would correspond to about 32 million adult Americans who would be interested in being part of a secular organization. If we limit the potentially interested population to just atheists in the US,<sup>5</sup> the corresponding number would be about 4 million atheist Americans who consider it very impor-

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<sup>5</sup> Roughly 3% of adult Americans are atheists based on the 2014 General Social Survey (Smith, Marsden, and Kim 2012).

tant to belong to a community of people who share their beliefs and values. Based on interviews with leaders of the most prominent secular organizations in the US,<sup>6</sup> the actual number of members of these organizations or subscribers to their various magazines totals somewhere in the range of 50,000 to 100,000 individuals. These disparate numbers are not all that surprising when you think about them from a social movements perspective. All social movements have varied constituencies. There are core members<sup>7</sup> – those who are actively involved in the day-to-day activities of the various social movement organizations. Then there are the members who support the movement – often financially, but potentially in other ways – and are involved when they can be. There is also a sympathetic public – individuals who would support the movement but are either not aware of it, too busy with other things, or simply free-riding (i.e., getting the benefits from the social movement without doing any of the work). Finally, there is the unsympathetic public, or those who actually oppose the aims of the movement. For organized secularism in the US, the core leaders likely number in the hundreds, the members number in the tens of thousands, and the sympathetic public number in the tens of millions. However, the unsympathetic public numbers in the hundreds of millions. Organized secularism may be growing, but there is still a proverbial mountain to climb.

While organized secularism is a global phenomenon, we necessarily had to limit the scope of this volume. As a result, almost all of the chapters focus on the US. There are two exceptions. A chapter that compares the US and Germany (Chapter 6, Mastiaux), and a chapter that discusses the organizational dynamics in England at the time the terms “secular” and “secularism” were coined (see Chapter 3, Rectenwald) which has significant implications for later developments in the US. The decision to focus on the American context resulted from several factors. On the surface, there is the practical reason that the idea for this book grew out of an international conference held in California in 2014 and various papers about organized secularism in America that were presented there. But there’s a more important theoretical reason, which was reflected in that choice of venue for the conference, and that is a perception of change in the American context. The US has long been seen as atypical in its relatively high levels of religiosity compared to other wealthy, industrialized societies, especially those in Europe. The recent dramatic increase in those claiming no reli-

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<sup>6</sup> See Chapter 4 for more information on the study that serves as the basis for this estimate.

<sup>7</sup> Some of these individuals refer to themselves as “professional atheists,” though not all do.

gion (often dubbed the “Nones”),<sup>8</sup> from between 4 and 7 percent of the US population in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century to around 25 percent today, represents a dramatic shift from the past. While not all individuals who decline to affiliate with religion are secular and, among those who are, not all of them affiliate with secular organizations, they constitute a large and growing audience and pool of potential members for secular organizations. This means organized secularism in the US faces a very different environment than it did in the past, which is worth studying.

Limiting our focus to the US also has a methodological benefit. It enables a multi-perspective, multi-dimensional analysis of organized secularism in one particular geographical setting, which deepens our understanding and enables a richer comparative framework in the future. By focusing on the US, we don’t mean to suggest that the secular movement is more highly organized in the US or that what is happening with organized secularism is more important in the US than in any other part of the world. To the contrary, there is a lot that organized secularism in the US can learn from other countries (Cragun 2015a), and there is a great deal that scholars have learned from the study of organized secularism elsewhere (e.g., see Engelke 2012, 2014; Lee 2015; Kosmin & Keysar 2007; Mumford 2014; Quack 2011; Wohlrab-Sahr 2012, 2015). We strongly encourage more research on organized secularism in other countries around the world.

This volume is organized into three sections. The first is primarily historical and theoretical. The aim is to provide some background both on the history of organized secularism but also on the terminology that is often used when describing those who would consider themselves part of the organized secular movement. The chapters in the second section offer fresh empirical data about a variety of secular organizations with an aim to better understand what they do, how they function, and what their aims are. The final section provides some insight into what secular and nonreligious individuals need and how organized secularism can help fulfill those needs. In a sense, the last section is pointing out that becoming nonreligious does require some reconfiguring of one’s life. How does one manage important life transitions, like marriage and death, without the trappings of religion? Obviously it is possible, but more can

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<sup>8</sup> A growing number of publications refer to the nonreligious as “nones.” This label comes from a response to a survey item that asks people, “What is your religion, if any”? One of the options was “none.” Those who chose this option were labeled as “nones.” In line with suggestions in various publications on the nonreligious, we generally refrain from using the term “none” as it implicitly suggests that these individuals are lacking something (see Cragun and Hammer, 2011; Lee, 2012).

be done by secular organizations to provide secular alternatives to religious rituals for those individuals who want them.

The first chapter, by **Charles Richter**, takes readers on a trip through history, illustrating that definitions of terms like “secular” and “humanist” are complicated. They are complicated by the time period, the context, and, in particular, by who is using the term, as all people bring biases and agendas into discussions surrounding these topics. Questions raised in this chapter are further illuminated in the following chapter, by **Michael Rectenwald**, which describes the origins of the terms “secular” and “secularism” in mid 19<sup>th</sup> century England by George Jacob Holyoake. His chapter goes on to illustrate that, shortly after the terms were coined, debate over what they should mean arose, and – foreshadowing much of the history of organized secularism – what followed was divisions, tensions, and splits within the fledgling secular movement. The history Rectenwald describes, as well as that in the chapter by **Lori Fazzino and Ryan Cragun**, makes it clear that organized secularism is, like most social movements, contentious, with significant internal divisions. As Fazzino and Cragun point out, internal division can be but often is not a definitively negative characteristic of a social movement, as conflict has the propitious effect of making room for people of varied perspectives within a movement. This is true even if conflict may, in some sense, distract the focus of the movement from the change it wants to instead focus on what it wants to change.

The final chapter in this section, by **John Shook**, questions the way in which scholarship has conceptualized organized secularism in the past. Shook shows how previous research in secular studies has often allowed itself to be defined by theology and religion. In contrast, Shook argues that the secular predates that which is religious, supercedes it, and that those studying it (whatever “it” is) should set out their own agenda separate from religious studies, the study of religion, and theology. As Shook argues, the domain of the secular should not be contingent upon its “otherness” from religion, but rather can and should be a self-chosen collection of topics that secular scholars and scholars of secularism choose to include within this area of inquiry. To do otherwise is to continue to allow religion to control the study of that which religion should not control. Shook also illustrates that predetermined secular categories may not represent reality, and that those studying the secular need to be careful that they do not reify the realities they have created. By recognizing that the secular is not contingent upon the religious, Shook is then able to develop the ideas of ‘polysecularity’ and ‘polysecularism’, which reflect the many ways people, organizations, and nations can be secular and the varied interests and agendas that may be espoused by secularism, respectively. Shook is not the first to suggest there is variety within secularism (see, for example, the Diversity of Non-religion Project,

<http://www.nonreligion.net/> or the Multiple Secularities Project, <http://www.multiple-secularities.de/> ), but the terms he coins offer a fresh way to frame the idea that what is secular is not singular; it is many.

The next section offers much needed new empirical data illustrating the variety of contemporary forms of organized secularism, how they build group identity and structure, and the activities in which they engage. **Amanda Schutz**'s chapter looks inside the growing diversity of organizations that exist within the larger movement. While earlier research often depicted atheists who attend atheist groups as old, crotchety, white men (see Hunsberger 2006), Schutz's chapter illustrates that the nonreligious are far more diverse than that stereotype. Drawing on organizational theory, Schutz shows that nonreligious individuals are increasingly aware of and accepting of the fact that secular people are diverse and have varied needs. Some want to get together with other nonreligious people to have fun, while others are more interested in education or volunteering. As the number of nonreligious people grows in the US, it seems likely, based on Schutz's research, that the variety of secular organizations in any given location will continue to grow to meet the demands and interests of the nonreligious.

A number of previous studies have noted the importance of the internet for atheist and secular activism. **Aislinn Addington**'s chapter adds to this growing body of research by describing in detail how atheist identity construction, finding support for often newly adopted and marginalized secular identities, and secular organizing all rely upon the internet, at least for a sizable proportion of atheists.

A relative newcomer to organized secularism, the Sunday Assembly (SA) garnered significant media attention when it launched in 2013. **Jesse Smith**'s chapter describes the origins of the SA and argues that these "atheist churches" function to shape secular identities (at the individual and communal level), to demarcate boundaries between the secular and the religious, and to create secular communities. Of particular interest is how Smith draws connections between the structure, rituals, and functions of religious congregations and their corresponding manifestations in Assemblies.

**Jacqui Frost**'s chapter provides a different perspective on SA, focusing on its role in helping individuals forge a secular identity. SA is attractive to many secular Americans who want to move beyond rejecting religion and build a "positive" secular community. Yet, as Frost shows, there are inherent tensions in this quest that can be difficult to reconcile. SA's explicit goal is to be "radically inclusive" while simultaneously drawing boundaries that keep spiritual and supernatural rhetoric out of the assembly. SA also engages in selective appropriation of the institutional form of "church" that eschews the hierarchy and dogma

found in a religious church while attempting to replicate its ritualized, emotionally engaged communalities.

The final section shifts the focus to the personal and social needs of nonreligious individuals who join these organizations. The chapter by **Joseph Langston, Joseph Hammer, and Ryan Cragun** provides some valuable quantitative data on the question of why some nonreligious and secular individuals belong to secular, humanist, atheist, or freethought groups and others do not. Langston et al. find that a number of factors influence membership in organized secularism, from age and sex to general opinions on what the movement should be doing. However, one of the more important findings is that there are many nonreligious and secular individuals who would be involved in organized secularism if there were groups in their local area, suggesting that there is unmet demand for organized secularism.

**Bjorn Mastiaux**'s chapter explores the motives of individuals who do affiliate with secular organizations. Drawing on qualitative data from affiliates in Germany and the United States, he analyzes both their primary motives (e.g., the need for belonging or the desire for political change) and their dominant behavioral patterns (e.g., self oriented or other oriented), resulting in a typology of eight ideal types of organized atheists.

Religion has long offered the cultural toolkit for individuals and families to celebrate life passages such as marriage, childbirth, or death. These religious structures are so dominant in American society that even nonreligious people will often use them, either by default or because of cultural pressure. In some societies, such as Denmark, the national Church is a fairly successful provider of such resources for nonreligious individuals (Zuckerman 2008). Yet research shows that, in the US, organized religious structures often do not adequately meet the needs of and may sometimes even cause harm to nonreligious people (c.f. Smith-Stoner 2007). In recent years the nonreligious are increasingly looking to create their own symbols and meaning systems that authentically reflect their secular value systems and secular organizations can help them do that. **Dusty Hoesly**'s chapter explores how secular couples use the Universal Life Church (ULC) to create nonreligious wedding ceremonies. Yet ULC's status as a secular organization is ambiguous. Though its teachings and practices appear to be secular, it identifies as a religious organization, albeit for entirely pragmatic reasons: US law favors religious organizations when it comes to recognizing marriages. This suggests that the rights of secular organizations in the US may still lag behind those of some of their European counterparts. The chapter by **Nick MacMurry and Lori Fazzino** examines how secular individuals understand death and dying and the resources they draw on to help them manage that process. The final chapter of the book, by **Barry Kosmin**, offers some concluding re-

flections on the issues raised in the volume and outlines an agenda for future research.

Collectively, the chapters in this volume offer a variety of insights and theoretical perspectives that can help those of us interested in organized secularism to understand more about the roots of the movement, how it currently functions, and what the future will bring for organized secularism in the US. While there are still a number of challenges for this small but growing movement to overcome, that the movement has grown to the point that it warrants serious scholarly attention suggests that organized secularism in the US has come of age.

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