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Old Questions and New Issues for Organized Secularism in the United States

1 Introduction

American secularism is a feature of American exceptionalism.¹ It is unique in its origins as well as its composition. I have suggested that American history since 1776 has produced alternations between eras of Christian religious ‘awakenings’ and periods of ‘secular’ or non-religious dominance and so, in effect, a continuous ‘culture war’ over the nature and purpose of the American nation (Kosmin 2014a). Recently national social trends seem to suggest the country is entering a new secular phase (Kosmin 2013). The ARIS 2008 findings showed that half of U.S households did not currently belong to a religious congregation and on the average Sunday 73% of Americans did not go to Church. While 27% of Americans did not anticipate a religious funeral, 30% of Americans did not believe in a personal biblical style God (Kosmin et al 2009). And more recent surveys have confirmed these data and trends so we may be at an important tipping point in U.S. history. The evidence demonstrates that the Zeitgeist, if not the Force, is with the secular and secularizing Nones and this development makes the analysis and study of secularism per se of major relevance for American social science.

Religious conservatism, faith-based initiatives, religion-related terrorism, the New Atheist texts, and increasing use of digital and ‘social’ media have energized and emboldened secularist advocates, networks, and organizations at both local and national levels. Accelerated growth in membership has been reported in recent years by nationwide organizations with clear secularist agendas including the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), Center for Inquiry (CFI), American Atheists (AA), American Humanist Association (AHA), Secular Student Alliance (SSA) and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (MAFF). On the intentional side, public advertising campaigns and events have been mounted in major cities. This new secularist surge of activism has been framed, in part, as an identity politics issue and movement in the United States. Some present themselves as members of a marginalized and maligned minority

¹ The terms secular, secularist/secularism, secularize, and secularization here are used in the sense discussed in the Introduction to this volume; referring respectively to non-religious, ideology that endorses non-religion, activities or process of reducing the influence of religion, and the outcome of that process.
(not unlike gays and lesbians) whose rights have been curtailed or denied (Cragun et al. 2012). Such efforts may be having an effect. References to atheists (or nonbelievers), even in the American ‘public square’, have become noticeably more frequent and prominent – such as, for example, President Barack Obama’s inclusion of nonbelievers in his first inaugural address (Grossman 2009) and references to ‘agnostic and atheist brothers and sisters’ by speakers at anti-capitalist rallies (Landsberg 2011).

Nevertheless, until quite recently sociological work on secularization virtually ignored active or organized forms of atheism and the myriad of other secularist constructs or those that share criticism or rejection of religious ideas, behavior, or institutions, such as freethought, secular humanism, skepticism, positivism, and philosophical materialism or naturalism (Pasquale 2007; 2010). Colin Campbell noted ‘[t]he fact that irreligious movements act as agents of secularization has strangely enough been overlooked by sociologists in their contribution to the continuing secularization debate [...] one has to search hard to find examples of sociologists referring to material about irreligion in this context’ (1971: 7). As Beckford summarized the matter:

[T]hey have tended to overlook, omit or deliberately ignore the significance of both organized and diffuse attacks on religion. It is as if the progress of secularization could be adequately accounted for in terms of the effect of abstract cultural forces, such as class struggle or functional differentiation, without consideration of the agents and agencies that actively campaigned for secularism and secular societies. Given that a wide range of campaigns, movements and voluntary associations promoted secularism, rationalism, atheism and humanism in Britain and elsewhere, it is important to consider their direct and indirect contributions to secularization and to interpretations of secularization. (2003: 36)

It could be argued that in the U.S. the paucity of scholarly attention to organized secularism until recently was justified because it reflected the societal reality of the lack of institutionalization and divisions that has bedeviled free thinkers and secularists in the U.S. for more than a century. Only a small percentage of the millions who could be identified as Seculars belong to explicitly secularist groups. In fact, secularism could be described as a classic leaderless movement in America (Cragun & Fazzino, this volume). Despite accelerating growth in recent years, numbers of atheist and secularist group affiliates have always been, and remain, extremely small—not only with respect to the populations of the societies in which they emerge, but with respect to those people who reasonably may be characterized as substantially or thoroughly nonreligious (Budd 1977; Campbell 1971). Historically even during periods of substantially declining religiosity such as the 1930s and 1960s, secularist organizations failed to capitalize on their opportunity with even remotely proportionate growth rates (Demer-
ath and Thiessen 1966; Warren 1943). As Steve Bruce (2002) and John Shook (this volume) have suggested, the natural resting state of secularity tends to be passive indifference to religion, apatheism, rather than active atheism or irreligion.

Secularist organizations (like the American Humanist Association, Council for Secular Humanism, Freedom From Religion Foundation and American Atheists) have been advocating secularization in the United States for decades, particularly as watchdogs regarding infringement of constitutional church-state separation. While their activities have triggered skirmishes with religious advocates along the way, incremental increases in the population of Nones seem more attributable to cultural, political, or demographic factors than to organized intentional activity. A surge of religious abandonment in the 1960s and 70s, for example, was largely attributable to developmental adolescent apostasy in the Baby Boom generation (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Some Baby Boomers returned to organized religion but many did not, giving way to increasing proportions of ‘Nones’ in succeeding cohorts as future generations were not raised in a religion. Hout and Fischer concluded that ‘change in the religious preferences of believers in the 1990s contributed more to the increase in no religious preference than disbelief did’ (2002: 178).

Much like organized religion, secularism is a diverse and pluralist tradition producing competing visions and organizations. Or, alternatively and negatively, it can be pictured as a weak worldview movement rent by lack of consensus on definitions and goals from its inception (Rectenwald, Mastiaux, this volume). Secularism has had a sectarian quality since its beginnings because of the manner in which diversity of philosophical approach to “human consciousness” as demonstrated in the Shook’s elaborate taxonomy (this volume) were translated into calls for social and political action with regard to religion. This uncertainty has produced a variety of binaries that can be described as “soft” and “hard” secularism (Kosmin 2007). On one side is the “substitutionist” or “accommodationist” tradition of Holyoake, Huxley and Dewey, and before them the “soft” thinkers of the Enlightenment, such as John Locke, Adam Smith, and Thomas Jefferson, whose view of humanity led them to doubt that secularization would be sweeping, thorough and total. The Sunday Assembly (see chapters by Smith and Frost in this volume) may be seen as a contemporary illustration of this tradition. On the “hard” side stands the “eliminationist” and “confrontationist” tradition of “out Atheists” like Bradlaugh, Marxist-Leninists and nowadays the New Atheists (Campbell 1971, 54). The Atheist Alliance and the American Atheists (see chapters by Mastiaux, and Fazzino & Cragun in this volume) are contemporary examples of this second type.

Disagreements over strategy and style reflect these longstanding and deep ideological divisions among secularists (Richter and Langston this volume). In
the contemporary U.S. the degree to which active atheism, particularly as advocated by the New Atheism, may have contrary effects – prompting religious backlash, promotion, and reactionary adherence – cannot be discounted (Bullivant 2010; Kosmin 2014b). This hostility to atheism as a result of its radical image, of course, is longstanding and consistent with the teachings of John Locke in *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689). As in the past, this negative reaction prompts debate and disagreement among secularists of varying stripes (e.g., Baggini 2007; Kurzt 2010; Uhl 2011). ‘Moderates’ often advocating a positive free standing secularism complain that acerbic or absolutist ‘shock and awe tactics. . .polarize identities’ and push otherwise moderate religious allies ‘into the arms of the extremists’ (Baggini 2007: 42, 44).

In the U.S. only a tiny percentage of freethinkers have ever been affiliated with secular organizations whereas around 60% of the religious population currently belongs to a congregation (Kosmin and Keysar 2009). The low rates of affiliation, mobilization and participation is even more problematic in the current circumstances of a rapid increase in the potential constituency for organized secularism. This deficiency is a familiar theme in secularist gatherings where the “faithful faithless” lament the failure of non-theist organizations to realize their full political and cultural potential— their inability to penetrate and mobilize their natural market. Secularist organizations today as in the past do indeed face a social marketing problem as the preceding chapters directly and indirectly evidence. Organized secularism in the U.S. has failed to affiliate even a fraction of the more than 10 million strong core constituency of self-identifying non-believers – the “hard secularists” (Kosmin 2007), those willing to self-identify as atheists and agnostics. Using wider theological or (un)belief criteria as by set out in Shook’s “polysecularism” this target group could be even a larger and more sizeable demographic amounting to one in four Americans according to the findings of recent national surveys. Secularist organizations have no real need to proselytize since they already have a 50 million strong potential constituency of Nones. Organic economic and societal forces have created this social momentum towards mass secularity. Thus the present challenge for secularist organizations is not to produce growth but building the self-awareness and the mobilization of this population. The result of this lack of mobilization and structural weakness is most evident in the political arena where identifying Nones are almost non-existent and so the most under-represented population in the country in terms of political office holders.
2 Recruitment and Organizational Challenges

The religiosity of the United States, compared with other developed societies, can be attributed to a ‘supply-side’ proliferation of religious products in a comparatively free market. Secularism seems to have a similar trajectory (Kosmin and Keysar 2006). We can explain the sectarian syndrome of proliferating small secular groups, by applying an economic market model to secular choices that parallels the religious marketplace. When free of monopolistic or governmental control, religious products naturally proliferate to satisfy multiple needs and varying tastes. The demographic profile of secularist activists is heavy with educators and intellectuals. This means secular organizations spend lot of time and energy on mission statements and discussion of principles often without reaching consensus. But many more non-activist secularists remain unaffiliated.

There is an obvious need to explain the paradox of rapidly growing numbers of Nones alongside only a slight uptick in secular organization affiliates and so the weakness of organized secularism. The most significant cause is that most Nones are Apatheists as indifferent and uninterested in secularism as they are in religion (see Langston, Shook this volume). Individually they have undergone a secularization of consciousness in that they have lost any sense of sin, concern for day of judgement, afterlife, heaven and hell and many traditional social taboos. Yet paradoxically the rise of “individuation and personalization” (Hoesly this volume) has inhibited affiliation with overtly secularist organizations. Presumably, one constraint for most Nones is that many of their immediate family and friends are believers. In fact, in U.S. society most discrimination and hostility against non-believers arises from family and friends rather than strangers in institutional settings (Cragun et al. 2011).

The lack of consensus over nomenclature and boundaries highlighted in this volume reflects the tensions among secular people over secular identities. A typology based on “state of individual consciousness” produces a binary model of hard and soft secularisms (Kosmin 2007). This bifurcation of secular perspectives on philosophy and religion comprises only one dimension of this typology. The second dimension is based on the distinction between individuals and institutions. Here the individual aspect primarily pertains to states of consciousness while the institutional aspect relates to social structures and their cultural systems. In reality, these are not closed cells but ranges stretched between the polarities of the dimensions. A range of intermediate positions can and does exist between soft-soft and hard-hard secularism. In addition, the boundary between the individual and the institutions is not firm in real life. There is interplay that
involves social expectations and constraints originating from institutions on the one hand and extreme subjective mental states that are individually based on the other. Given the intellectualism of secularists the outcome of all this is a predilection for sectarianism (Fazzino & Cragun, this volume).

The pioneering research on affiliation and membership patterns among secularists by Frank Pasquale (2007) highlighted this trend towards sectarianism. Nones tend to be individualists and skeptical of the value of organizations. They were never the types who joined the Elks, Rotarians and Masons, the traditional fraternal membership organizations, which are on the decline in the contemporary world of bowling alone. The character of the secular impulse itself tends to militate against institutional participation specifically on the basis of metaphysical world views. Pasquale goes as far as to suggest that many non-believers are “conflicted” about their own individual preferences and motives (Pasquale 2010: 2). Another factor that militates against affiliating most Nones is their individual psychological profile. They tend to be rather analytic and critical. They have difficulty endorsing standard statements of opinion. They would rather dissect and discuss than offer straight positions. Most dislike labels and labeling. Whereas atheists tend to be confident in their identity and hold strident opinions, by way of contrast the more numerous agnostics, humanists, and ‘softer secularists”, hold to more moderate and qualified opinions. Their openness to alternatives and unwillingness to commit to a single viewpoint makes them particularly hard to organize. Thus secularism unsurprisingly has no official hierarchy or leadership. The obvious contrast to this semi-anarchic situation among free thinkers is the authoritarian personality types found in fundamentalist religious groups (Ellison and Sherkat 1993), composed of individuals who are anxious to submit to an authority and to follow a charismatic and often disciplinarian leader.

The notion that secularization is linked to a preference for autonomy finds support elsewhere as well. Langston’s research (this volume) tends to discredit ideological barriers and point out the psychological disposition and structural weaknesses and fractures that characterize secular organizations. Similarly, Bruce (2002) views the process of secularization as an individual process. While it can be characterized as affecting large collectivities, the decision to be secular is not a decision that is made at the group level. For Bruce, this decision is reached on an individual level. Each single individual makes up his or her own mind, however affected they may be by others, and therefore they all experience secularization as affirming their individual autonomy. The relationship of leaders to led is difficult because Nones tend to be suspicious of charisma and authority. Heightened individualism creates a mentality (if not the politics) whereby a majority is more libertarian than communitarian in organizational
outlook. For example, Mastiaux (this volume) showed there is a large pool of secular sympathizers but there is a lack of secular missionaries.

Obviously, the small size of secularist organizations means a lack of resources and professionals (clergy). This in turn weakens recruitment efforts so there is little outreach activity. Another indicator of institutional weakness is a paucity of donors, particularly large givers, to subsidize outreach. This deficiency means secular organizations have to rely on self-recruitment largely (Mastiaux, Schultz, Smith, Frost, this volume) and on social media. As a result there is little face to face engagement. De Tocqueville saw voluntary organization as a strength and uniqueness of American society. Yet most types of membership organizations e.g. trades unions, fraternal organizations such as Elks, Masons etc. are in decline and suffer from the bowling alone syndrome that weakens many voluntary organizations today (Putnam, 2000). Still, this is a particular problem for a contemporary movement that lacks inherited infrastructure and plant.

Added to those problems is the fact that most voluntary organizations are hit by burn out and turnover. This is a feature even of the student organizations SSA and CFI on college campuses. They operate in friendly markets with a constituency unburdened by family and job responsibilities but they face a difficult migratory structure namely a fast turnover of volunteer leadership (McGraw 2016). Today organized secularism faces a challenge in how to decide how to use to best advantage the groundswell of popular sentiment and opinion and the organic, secular trends in society and economy. We have to realize that membership organizations are hard to maintain and resource in today’s society if you are not offering tangibles, power or salvation to your followers; if the goal is to fight for their hearts and minds but not their souls. Rational choice theorists (Stark 1999; Stark and Bainbridge 1985) argue that human beings pervasively depend upon the supernatural ‘compensators’ offered by salvational religion for unfulfilled worldly expectations and rewards. If true, that reality requires secularists to learn new ways and techniques to acquire people’s loyalty.

The role of the Internet in creating networks of seculars into new organizational forms is a paramount concern for secular organizations. But how does that translate into changing people’s sense of belonging or identification, which is necessary to grow a movement? The emergence of digital technologies (internet, social media) – another structural (or infrastructural) factor – is likely playing a role, particularly among the young (Addington, this volume). A young demographic is not hidebound by tradition so they are early adopters of technology. Atheists are a rare population, a geographically dispersed minority in many locations. Younger cohorts, in particular, who were weaned on the Web are considered ideal for creating ‘imagined communities’ and virtual movements through blogs, Internet-organized ‘meet-ups’, ‘tweets’ and ‘open posts’ (Cimino and
Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012). These new media are enabling atheistic messages to reach larger audiences, no matter how remote or culturally insulated. How far this trend can overcome the face-to-face deficiencies only time will tell.

Another methodology which has been adopted by organized secularism recently is public signaling –stickers, flags, tee-shirts, advertising posters on buses and on the highways and Reason Rallies. In 2014 several secularist organizations joined together to create a new “Openly Secular” initiative (Openlysecular.org). The outrage and grievance peddling described by Mastiaux (this volume) as “moral Shock” is best seen in the FFRF strategy of seeking legal fights in middle America, suing local governments, school boards and police departments over prayers and religious symbols infringing the separation of church and state.

As we have noted, Nones tend to be individualists, not joiners. Most Nones also tend towards being political independents but that is not entirely true of secular activists. The profile of the leaders and members of secular organizations is an important factor in the image and appeal. Activist secularists and the leadership are overwhelmingly male, white, well educated, older, and affluent (Keyser, 2007). The social majority of secular activists in terms of race, education, age and income, regardless of where they live, has all the characteristics consistent with political conservatism and country club membership, or so one would think. The reality is otherwise. For example, 64% of the readers of the Council for Secular Humanism’s of Free Inquiry self-identified in 2015 as Liberals or Progressives (Tom Flynn 2016). AA and AHA members tend to be even more likely to be social and political progressives (Fazzino & Cragun, this volume). This overlap between political liberalism and public secularity can be expected to deepen under the Trump administration.

Nevertheless, gender differences and minority representation are important differentiators that help explain the profile of identification groups and organizations. Men tend to be more militant than women and that factor is said to inhibit female recruitment. This has led to calls for more diversity by gender and race. So CFI has sponsored three Women in Secularism Conferences and AHA and CFI have established sub-groups for African-Americans. There is some recognition among secular activists of generational issues and an emphasis on recruiting Millenials. Indeed the student generation is very sympathetic to secularism but few seem to have the time or inclination to be activists, the interest to purchase secularist publications, or the resources to be donors (Kosmin 2014c).

As regards Hispanics and Asians, secular organizations are myopic. Research such as the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture’s (ISSSSC) report on Latinos, has been ignored by secular organizations (Navarro et al). This failure epitomizes the short-sightedness problem of secularist organiza-
tions and their obliviousness to important facts and opportunities. The findings show that despite the stereotype of Latinos being a naturally religious community there is a new and expanding constituency of Nones among college educated and English-speaking Latinos. These people are totally invisible to the media, scholars and unfortunately to most secular organizations. The explanation is that they fail to fit the common stereotype of the religious Latino. That prejudice is explicable for the media that loves stereotypes and values exoticism and photogenic Catholic processions but secular organizations lose when they ignore social reality. The same deficiency reappears in their failure to outreach to Asian-Americans who ISSSC research has repeatedly identified as the most secularized population group in the country. In short, the leadership profile and membership ranks of organized secularism appear unlikely to be transformed in the near future.

3 Congregation and Community Models

The membership of religious congregations in the U.S. has a demographic profile very different from that of the secular organizations – older white males – as described above. The churches tend to disproportionally attract rural dwellers, African-Americans, older women and young families (Kosmin and Keysar 2006; Manning 2015). The secular Sunday Assemblies’ constituency described by Smith and Frost (this volume) appears different again, having a distinct social background and psychological profile mainly composed of urban young singles, the proverbial Yuppies. Yet these “seekers” of groupness and community are very much a minority of the secular Nones (Schutz, Smith, this volume). This population’s need for the support of others is often derided by the majority of the activist seculars, with their more individualistic and autonomous personalities particularly by “out Atheists” with grievances against religion or escaping what they see as personal trauma caused by religion. As we have noted expressive individualism is more common than collectivism among Nones. Nevertheless the Sunday Assembly movement has attracted attention from the media. It is regarded as a strategy that might overcome the problems and constraints of organized secularism with recruitment described above. Apparently the new technology and media work well for Sunday Assemblies as they do for Evangelicals. These movements are not as burdened by complicated and clergy-focused rituals as are Catholic and Orthodox Christianity, Judaism and Hinduism (Addington, this volume).

Historically the American population has been socialized to see the Protestant congregational model as normative. The cultural hegemony of organized re-
ligion and Christianity means that Non-Christian traditions, Jews, Buddhist, Muslims and Hindus have adopted this congregational structure in America. The Sunday Assembly’s particular organizational structure is the lay led Protestant denomination with a liberal model of standardized services and notions of voluntary work towards the “common good”. The medium is the message. The Sunday Assembly has adopted a familiar Protestant Christian format and style geared to its constituency of young Recovering Protestants meeting in a deconsecrated church on a Sunday morning.

Of course an organizational model of secularized congregations parallel to organized religion has been tried before by Ethical Culture, Humanistic Judaism and the Unitarians but it did not taken off as a mass movement. One reason is that Secular Humanism and atheism have found it difficult to easily reproduce the family and generational nexus of ties that religion offers. If the Sunday Assembly is to succeed it will need to provide the social provision typical of religious congregations such as welfare and charity work and early childhood education (Manning 2015). Secular ceremonies and life cycle rituals are obvious next steps. The Assemblies’ predicament is whether to follow the Humanistic Judaism and Ethical Culture model and label themselves as a religion with clergy, thus gaining the attendant tax and legal advantages, or to utilize the Universal Life Church fiction (Hoesly this volume). Yet many secularists value radical purity and the sectarian and fissiparous tendencies that plague secularism have already affected the Assembly movement with the rise of the “splitters” of Godless Revival (Smith; Fazzino and Cragun, this volume)

It is worth placing the Sunday Assembly in the comparative context of the earlier efforts at secular congregationalism because it provides insights into the particular dilemmas organized secularism faces. Ethical Culture (American Ethical Union) was founded by Felix Adler in New York City in 1877. Adler was a deconverted rabbi and son of a Reform Rabbi. Very much a “progressive” he organized Sunday meetings in an attempt to offer a more universalistic, ethnicity free inclusive organization. Ethical Culture offered life cycle rituals. Its motto was “deed not creed” and it was geared to urban social action sponsoring a kindergarten, school and housing and philanthropic projects (Radest 1969). Humanistic Judaism, the “Saturday Assembly” – a Judaism without God- was founded in Michigan in 1963 by Rabbi Sherwin Wine (Rowens 2004). It has 30 congregations and 10,000 members in the U.S. Compared to Ethical Culture and the Sunday Assembly its services offers more ritualistic ceremonies that reflect the heritage of the audience, including censored traditional Hebrew texts. It is socially progressive, welcomes “intermarried” couples and operates gender equality (Chalom 2010).
The secular congregations may be viewed as close to Comte’s vision of religions of humanity. And their placement on the soft side of secularism makes them open to joining ecumenical religious coalitions and civic alliances with liberal religious traditions and so fitting into the civic life of mainstream America. The public’s demand for life cycle rituals and particularly state recognized marriage ceremonies encouraged Humanistic Judaism and Ethical Culture to claim official status as religions and recruit clergy as state recognized marriage officers. That strategy provides tax privileges (e.g. clergy parsonage tax relief) and legal autonomy for the congregation (the same fiction described by Hoesly for the ULF). The exploitation of unique U.S. constitutional provisions particularly freedom from financial supervision (e.g. exemption from the need to submit IRS Form 990 that applies to other non-profit organizations) favors organized religion and disadvantages organized secularism unless it compromises. One response is to establish secular celebrant training program and several secularist organizations have begun campaigns for state recognition (e.g. Indiana 2016). Alongside that, they can fight for a level playing field and true equality e.g. the FFRF claim for parsonage tax relief (Freethought Today, Vol 33 No 5 June/July 2016).

Burial and death rituals are less subject to state intervention than marriage licensing but consumerism and market forces are more at play. The ARIS 2008 finding, which discovered that 27% of Americans do not expect to have a religious funeral, was a surprise. But it was noted by funeral directors and that industry has responded to market forces such as the rising demand for cremation (The Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 8.21.2015) Structural forces such as the existence of an established industry makes it difficult for secular organizations to exploit the rising preference for non-religious interment. A secular community can offer support and consolation in bereavement but this remains a family arena and most families still have a religious majority that sees secular “toolkits” as having an emotional deficit (MacMurray, this volume) compared with traditional religious burial and mourning rituals.

4 Appropriation of the Civic Square

One of the weaknesses of organized secularism is its lack of imagination and opportunism in claiming territory and furthering its cause using the existing agencies that advance the common good in society. Organized secularism’s myopia is probably due to its fractured nature and poor leadership. In fact, a wider notion of secularism with more extravagant claims is possible and this could make it more recognized and mainstream in society. For example, secularists have not
focused recently on the role of the public school as a mass secularizing and secular organization. The philosopher John Dewey saw this opportunity to use the American public school to promote a democratic secular education based on freedom, equality, social cohesion and commitment to Human Rights as against the separatism and religious segregation of faith schools (Dewey 1916).

Campbell concluded that ‘[t]he irreligious movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assisted in the secularization of society in the sense that they promoted and accelerated the disengagement of various social institutions and activities from the legitimation and control of religion’ (1971: 121–122). Most sociologists who studied these phenomena characterized them as loose-knit or ideologically ‘diffuse’ (Budd 1967), organizationally ‘precarious’ (Demerath and Thiessen 1966), frequently short-lived, and of negligible significance overall. Campbell attributed these judgments to a tendency to approach these phenomena with religious (read: Christian) organizations in mind. This, he argued, is inappropriate. It obscures the distinctive social forms and activities through which such constructs have played secularizing roles. These tend to be task-specific, educational, political, or associational (rather than communal). As such they have more in common with labor unions, political movements, or advocacy groups than with church congregations or communities. Campaigns against religious blasphemy laws, challenges to science, or moral legislation and for church-state separation or rights to privacy and alternative lifestyles have undoubtedly had some secularizing (and liberalizing or individualizing) effects.

An obvious arena for enhancing secularization has been sports and recreation. In 1934 religion, i.e. the churches, lost the struggle against Sunday professional baseball (Bevis 2003). The growing influence of major sports corporations in the transformation of Sunday is best expressed in the history of the National Football League’s Super Bowl. It has been played on Sunday since 1967 and it is now widely recognized as a national secular holiday (MacCambridge 2004). The Olympic Movement, with its ethos and hymn, can also be envisaged as part of the international secular realm. Sports compete with religious activities in time use and under Title IX it emancipates women to the detriment of conservative religions.

Whether the emphasis is on science, politics or any other area of life, it seems that secularists support efforts, public or private, that justify their belief systems and advance society in the direction they believe it should go, which is almost without exception in the way of progress. In this view, old and outdated ways of thinking, often entrenched in religion, are just anchors that hold society back from that progress. Secularists’ relationship to the arts and culture is a key area of potential strength—and one that challenges the German sociologist Max Weber’s dictum that the process of secularization in the West was part of the dis-
enchantment of the world, a process whereby magic and mystery were banished from the mainstream of our culture (Weber 1905). Such criticism of modernity and the associated triumph of science and rationalism, maintains that a secular society and culture has no place for the spiritual, the sublime or the romantic. Yet a visit to any of the nation’s museums and art galleries dispels this conclusion. These public institutions are secular shrines and places of deep meaning in contemporary culture. Americans view museums, art galleries and public libraries as places of awe and reverence characterized by silence and decorum. The secularizing influence of science and natural history museums is obvious, otherwise there would be no need for a rival Bible-oriented Creation Museum in Kentucky.

Most public museums’ mission statements reflect the heritage of Renaissance-style humanism and the Enlightenment, the essential harbingers of secularism. Museums do an excellent job of conveying secular values by stating their hopes to inspire people of all backgrounds by imbuing them with a greater appreciation for human achievement and diversity. The nation’s cultural institutions espouse pluralistic values and court broad audiences implicitly offering visitors, from every background a chance to connect with one another through dialogue and shared experiences with the arts. The impulse to universalize goes hand in hand with the tendency to secularize. One can see museums as temples of a sort: temples of culture and memory. Older museums are notable for their classical i.e. pre-Christian architecture. The contemporary museum is often heavy on glass, suggesting the absence of boundaries, again a very secular concept.

Similarly early public expressions of the secular with a clear aim and purpose, both personal and civic, were the higher educational institutions, inspired by the Enlightenment. Again visually, they tended to looked back to classical pre-Christian Greek models symbolized in architecture e.g. Doric columns. The prime example is Jefferson’s University of Virginia 1818, an “academical village” and “temple of knowledge” inspired by his passion for Palladian architecture and Greek philosophers. Likewise the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham was the “spiritual founder” of the entirely secular University College London (1826) the “godless college” that ended the hitherto Anglican religious monopoly of university education in England. UCL unsurprisingly was the first to admit students regardless of their religion and the first to admit women on equal terms with men.

Unfortunately, the inability of secularists and secular organizations to assert themselves as the guardians of high culture and of the heritage of civic cultural institutions also has linkages to their paucity of language and failure to create a uniquely secular vocabulary:
When an atheist feels “awe” when considering the majesty of nature, at present they have just one term to describe that – a “spiritual” experience. And that term is owned by the religious. Humanists need new terminology (e.g., a “human” experience) to describe phenomena like this that are secular in orientation else they will cede this ground to the religious. (Cragun & Kosmin 2011).

5 Future Prospects

Opening up a new field like the study of secularism, which lacks a common terminology and tools of analysis, is a learning process. Analyzing the relationship of secular identity to boundaries and group membership is a challenge due to this lack of conceptual clarity. Nevertheless, we have to study secularism not as the mirror image of religion nor using a theological paradigm. As the contributions to this volume suggest, secularism requires a new conceptual armory so it can be understood as an intellectual and social force in its own right.

On a practical level, organized secularism tries to keep up and remain relevant to a society and culture that is constantly evolving. Yet alongside new issues, old questions return and this volume highlights the challenges secular organizations face working out their values and policies on a whole range of issues. Organized secularism, reflecting the range of agendas of polysecularism (Shook, this volume), should have an advantage going forward because of its ability to rationally answer society’s growing bio-medical, environmental and climate change challenges and the ethical issues created by accelerating scientific and technological advances. Also on the individual level, despite their differences of style and approach (Fazzino & Cragun, this volume) secularist organizations do have a firm consensus about personal issues such as gender, abortion, and dignity in death. This agreement or common purpose provides a firm basis for alliances among secularist organizations and has the potential to make them more relevant and influential in the future. Their growing coherence could be accelerated if organized secularism could overcome its main structural weaknesses, lack of resources due to poor recruitment and fund-raising (Fazzino & Cragun, this volume). Here secularism stands in marked contrast to the highly mobilized and remarkably well-funded (often by tithing) Religious Right. This weakness can be viewed as the secular free rider problem. Here I should declare an interest not only as the founding director of the first and still only existing academic research institute on secularism only but also as a member of the Board of Directors of the Center for Inquiry. Organized secularism cannot flourish without adequate resources. As with any start-up the solution is an injection of substantial funds. Somehow, progressive populations such as the
young, wealthy, socially progressive tech elite of places like Silicon Valley need to be persuaded that their social, economic, political and personal career interests lie with support for the secular cause.

**Bibliography**


