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The Political Advantages of a Polysemous Secular

Abstract: This paper uses the occasion of the Secular Coalition for America’s first-ever Congressional briefing as a case study for demonstrating the political advantages a polysemous secular affords secular lobbyists. The briefing, conducted primarily for the benefit of staff members from the U.S. House of Representatives, offers a rare public forum in which the Secular Coalition tried to strike a balance between the two halves of its mission: advocating for non-theists and promoting secular government. In its efforts to fulfill this mission, the Secular Coalition conflates and distinguishes between four distinct meanings of the secular and secularism: the separation of church and state, the secular public sphere, the ideology of nonbelief, and a nascent secular identity. By studying the ongoing efforts of secular activists to redefine the place and meaning of the secular and the religious in American life, this paper contributes to the study of how the secular gets made, who makes it, and why.

Introduction

“Secular” has become an increasingly important term for organized nonbelievers in the United States. Its rich polysemy has allowed organizations like the Secular Student Alliance and the Secular Coalition for America to unite a wide range of nonbelievers while aligning themselves with the more inclusive goal of church-state separation. For decades, leaders of groups that organize atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and humanists have battled with one another for recognition, funding, and membership. These leaders are communicating and partnering more than ever before (Guenther, Mulligan, and Pap 2013:458-460), and they are doing so at a time when the numbers of non-theistic Americans and those with no religious affiliation are on the rise (Pew Forum 2012). While tensions among organizations still remain, they no longer prevent leaders from speaking at each other’s conventions, uniting in larger coalitions, or working together to build local communities of nonbelievers.

On October 1, 2012, the most prominent lobbying organization for nonbelievers,

the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), held its first-ever Congressional briefing. For weeks before, SCA had issued action alerts that urged recipients to contact their Representatives and request that they attend. Because Congress had adjourned more than a week earlier, on September 22nd, most Representatives had already returned to their home districts in order to campaign for the upcoming election on November 6th. Held in a small room on the southeast corner of the Cannon House Office Building, the event featured a panel of three speakers and drew a standing-room only crowd that included staff members from more than thirty-five Congressional offices. House staffers with whom I spoke before the briefing expressed their surprise at the existence of a secular lobby and were wary of the ambiguous implications of the briefing's title: "The State of Secular America."

As the briefing progressed, it became clear that these staffers were not the only ones to notice that "secular" is "polysemous" and can mean many things. The panelists, SCA's staff, and members of the audience struggled to find a shared understanding of the secular and debated its definition throughout the briefing. Its polysemy has posed a similar challenge to scholars, who in recent years have offered a range of understandings of the secular and secularism (see for example, Mahmood 2006; Taylor 2007; Modern 2011). Charles Taylor has called this range "the polysemy of the secular" and argued that its seemingly descriptive uses are latently normative (2009). Rather than "determine the essential meaning of 'the secular,'" Talal Asad has proposed "a more modest endeavor: An inquiry into what is involved when 'the secular' is invoked—who tries to define it, in what context, how, and why" (2011:673). Linell Cady and Elizabeth Shakman Hurd concur: "[O]ne must track the diverse ways the insistent claims to being secular are

made” (2010:12). Treating SCA’s first-ever Congressional briefing as a site of secular construction, this paper identifies four distinct ways in which secular activists frame the secular in order to advocate for non-theists and promote various understandings of secularism. As activists conflate and distinguish between these meanings of the secular, they extend the limits of its usage and enable new forms of social practice that remake what the secular is and what it can do in America today.

Background

Recent scholarship on America’s nonbelievers has focused largely on atheists (Ritchey 2009; J.M. Smith 2011, 2013; Smith and Cimino 2012; LeDrew 2013; Guenther, Mulligan, and Papp 2013). Other labels in the nonbeliever constellation, such as humanists, freethinkers, agnostics, and secularists, have received comparatively little attention. Though leaders representing organizations across the range of these labels have developed strong working relationships, scholars have yet to provide a holistic view of organized nonbelief in the United States. Cimino and Smith offer the most sustained engagement with other labels by including secular humanists in their discussion (2007) and using “secularist” as an umbrella category for the various groups (2011). LeDrew uses “secular” as a generic category and observes a distinction between “atheist, humanist, and secularist organizations” in passing, though his primary focus remains atheism (2013:446). And while J.M. Smith’s work offers an excellent and much-needed analysis of the role of local atheist communities in the formation of a collective atheist identity, he elides the difference between atheist and secular by using the terms interchangeably. In attempting to simplify the nonbeliever constellation, Smith even edits

a press release from SCA in order to remove their preferred term “nontheists” in favor of “atheists and secularists” (2013:94; for original, see Ahlquist 2010). Smith’s elision is understandable given the lively debate among organized nonbelievers as to what to call themselves, though these distinctions are crucial if one seeks to identify competing claims in the ongoing reconstruction of the American secular.

Scholars studying America’s nonbelievers and those attempting to organize them face a similar challenge: How does one speak about the coordinated efforts of these various groups who see themselves working in concert toward shared goals? As an expedient, this paper agrees with Nelson Tebbe’s usage of “nonbelievers” to describe those who lack belief in God, who more generally favor a naturalistic view of the universe, and who lack belief in the existence of the supernatural (2011:1117-1178). Specifically “organized” nonbelievers are those for whom the absence of theistic belief provides at least a partial basis for organizational membership and even community. The fact remains that trying to capture these collectively engaged actors by using “nonbelievers” without further qualification erases the complex heterogeneity that various subgroups like humanists and atheists continually reassert (see Calhoun 1994). For instance, when I visited the annual conference of the American Ethical Union in June of 2012, a group of non-theistic religious humanists were quick to correct my false assumptions about who they are. “We’re not nonbelievers,” they told me. “We believe in humanism and living an ethical life.”

As Asad, Cady, and Hurd have argued, attending to the actors, means, and stakes of the secular’s ongoing construction overcomes the need for a simple definition by looking at the ways in which such definitions get made. Given the inadequacy of

“nonbelievers” as a stable category of analysis, this paper focuses on the generative instability of the category of the secular. The term “secular activists” describes those who actively frame “secular” in public discourse in their efforts to effect social and political change (see Hunt, Benford, and Snow 1994). Secular activists include, in part, a national network of leaders who represent and manage their respective organizations while consciously working to construct a secular identity and viewing their collective efforts as part a secular social movement (see Melucci 1995; Polleta and Jasper 2001). In looking at the political advantages that a polysemous secular affords secular activists, this paper contributes to recent scholarly efforts to understand how the secular gets made and what it comes to mean. In addition, this paper uses the emerging networks of secular activism to provide the first broad view of the landscape of American nonbelief.

Methods

This paper relies on a qualitative study of the network of leaders who run America’s major nonbeliever organizations. To capture the diffuseness of this network, I used a multi-sited approach, attending dozens of events and visiting the offices of organizations based in California, Ohio, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Washington D.C., and Wisconsin (Marcus 1995). In addition to being a participant observer at conferences, lectures, training workshops, private meetings, and less formal social gatherings, I conducted sixty-five in-depth interviews with leaders, former leaders, and lay members of local and national organizations. Most of those whom I interviewed I reached by chain-referral, either through formal introduction or through recommendation and the use of publicly available contact information. Interviews were semi-structured

and covered a wide range of topics, including organizational and personal history, inter-organizational cooperation, and the constellation of labels used by nonbelievers.

In order to identify relevant nonbeliever organizations and study their ongoing activities, I analyzed hundreds of emails, blog posts, Facebook posts, and postings to online forums, as well as dozens of newsletters, magazines, and postings to a Google discussion group. In addition, I produced oral histories and ongoing timelines of the activities of the most prominent organizations and leaders. When possible, I have followed up with leaders by phone and email to acquire any data they are willing to share about their organizational membership and budgets, particularly when longitudinal data are available. Because many leaders have published books and contribute articles to mainstream newspapers and magazines, I have studied these materials in preparation for interviews and have tracked their publication since concluding interviews in January of 2013.

In analyzing interview data, fieldnotes, and data collected from textual sources I have paid close attention to language and its context in order to understand how activists rhetorically frame the secular (Williams and Williams 1995). By presenting meanings and usage that are not always clear to those who are not secular activists, they bring the secular out of what David A. Snow has called an “interpretive everyday frame” and into a “collective action frame” (2004:384-385). For example, that House staffers at SCA’s Congressional briefing were confused by the phrase, “the state of secular America,” indicates that an interpretive everyday frame was inadequate for understanding SCA’s use of the secular. Yet inasmuch as this paper examines how secular activists consciously conflate everyday and activist framings of the secular, it demonstrates how the secular’s

polysemy allows activists to double the frame, so to speak, by seeming to operate in an everyday frame while actually doing activism, or switching back and forth between the frames seamlessly. Secular activists attempt to create what Rhys H. Williams has called a “cultural resonance” by connecting their activist frames to more familiar everyday frames through the polysemy of the secular (2004).

Political scientist Andrew Davison takes a similar approach to sociologists who adopt the language of “framing,” though he calls it “hermeneutics” and relies on Ludwig Wittgenstein and Hans-Georg Gadamer to theorize how intersubjective meanings establish the structures through which various forms of secularism become possible (2010). In Davison’s language, this paper offers a careful analysis of intentional efforts to intersubjectively renegotiate the secular in order to generate new possibilities for collective action. These efforts are critical to SCA’s pursuit of its two-part mission, “to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints in the United States, and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government as the best guarantee of freedom for all” (SCA 2012). Connecting SCA’s House briefing with the wider aims of America’s secular activists offers a specific site—a crucible—for observing the ongoing reconstruction of the contemporary American secular.

A Brief History of the Secular Coalition

The Secular Coalition for America was founded in 2002 as the result of a years-long effort spearheaded by secular activist and College of Charleston Professor of Mathematics Herb Silverman.¹ Until it hired its first paid staff in 2005, SCA relied on

¹ Per ethnographic norms and the consent form they signed before agreeing to my interviews, I have anonymized all of my interviewees, except for those who have explicitly told me they would prefer to be quoted by name. I have drawn all uncited

volunteer leadership and the behind-the-scenes political clout of a small number of DC insiders interested in secular activism. From 2005 to 2009, under the leadership of Lori Lipman Brown, SCA grew to three full-time employees and nine member organizations and increased its budget from around fifty thousand dollars to several hundred thousand. Though modest growth continued under Lipman Brown's replacement, Sean Faircloth, SCA's Board members felt that professional lobbying leadership was necessary for the organization to expand its influence. In May of 2012, after going without an Executive Director for the better part of a year and turning to the services of a headhunter to identify potential applicants, SCA hired Edwina Rogers, its first leader with significant lobbying experience. Rogers is a self-described "huge Republican" who has operated in the Republican Party for more than twenty years and who has held appointments in the offices of conservative Senators Trent Lott and Jeff Sessions. She was also General Counsel to the National Republican Senatorial Committee during the Newt Gingrich-led Republican takeover in 1994 and an economic adviser to President George W. Bush. Hiring Rogers led to the resignation of at least one prominent member of SCA's Advisory Board, though all of the other organizational leaders whom I interviewed expressed guarded approval of her appointment.

Informed that if she did not "show results" within three months of her hiring, SCA's Board would fire her, Rogers worked quickly to expand the organization and restructure its activities to bring it into line with the practices of more prominent lobbying outfits. At present, SCA's offices are located just north of K Street, around the corner from one of its allies, Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Under

material, including institutional histories of nonbeliever organizations, from interviews and participant observation.

Rogers' leadership, SCA began sending weekly emails with news and updates on its own efforts and those of its member organizations. It also holds national conference calls on Thursdays at noon. Because lobbying efforts depend in part on the number of potential voters a given organization can prove it can mobilize, SCA is in the process of acquiring "endorsing" and "allied" organizations that agree with its mission in whole or in part, and with which it can work to leverage its position. In May 2012, SCA had 34 endorsing organizations, and as of early April 2014 it had 166. While this change reflects rapid growth, it also indicates that SCA has affiliated with only a small fraction of the more than 1,400 local nonbeliever organizations in the United States.

Today, SCA engages in a range of lobbying practices and outreach efforts intended to advocate for nonbelievers and catalyze secular activists. In addition to organizing state chapters and holding weekly conference calls, SCA regularly meets with Congressional and White House staff regarding legislation and policies of concern to its members. It also maintains a voting guide and Congressional report card for secular voters, mobilizes its members and member organizations to contact their Senators and Representatives regarding upcoming legislative votes, and lends support to the efforts of partner organizations on issues like science education and international advocacy for nonbelievers. In an effort to improve its secular activism at the grassroots, SCA now organizes lobbying training workshops, State and National Lobbying Days, and a Secular Summit, held annually in Washington DC. A leader at a prominent humanist organization reflected that SCA's most important contribution might be the communication and partnership it has encouraged among the leaders of its member organizations. "The leaders know each other," he told me, "and they don't always consult with each other

about every piece of activism. But at least there's some conversation."

The Polysemous Secular

Panelists, SCA staff, and audience members at the House briefing represented varying interests as they discussed and argued for particular ways of framing the secular. Some of their framings were consonant and even mutually constitutive, and others were in tension. The next section of this paper connects the actual statements of those who spoke at the House briefing with the wider efforts of secular activists. In so doing, each subsection will outline one of four distinct meanings of the secular: 1) secularism as the separation of church and state; 2) the secular public sphere 3) secularism as the ideology of unbelief; and 4) secular identity. Debates and confusion over these meanings among the briefing's participants reflect the ongoing reconstruction of the American secular.

1. The Secular Character of American Government:

Secularism as the Separation of Church and State

The briefing's first panelist, Ira C. Lupu, Professor Emeritus of Law at George Washington University, began by observing that SCA's materials reflect "quite a complex set of beliefs." Lupu is an expert on constitutional law who has written on the religion clauses of the First Amendment and is a Senior Fellow at the Emory University Center for Law and Religion (see, for example, 2010). Wanting to disentangle the multiple ways in which he saw SCA framing the secular, he drew a distinction between "atheism" and "secularism," where the former is privately held secular belief, and the latter is belief in the need for a secular government. While Lupu recognized that SCA might not want to

make a potentially divisive distinction between these two senses of the secular, he decided in preparing his remarks that doing so is important from a legal perspective and worth emphasizing in the context of the briefing.

In order to ground his discussion of secularism, Lupu cited the text of the first two clauses of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Remarking that these “sixteen words are not self-defining or self-explanatory,” he added that much of “what we think about them has come primarily from Supreme Court interpretation over the last seventy-five years.” While Lupu’s ballpark figure is about a decade off in strict terms of legal history, he is right to point to the 1940s as a time of great change in the relationship between the US Constitution and American understandings of the separation of church and state. It was not until 1947 with *Everson v. Board of Education of the Township of Ewing*, that the Supreme Court began to interpret the Constitution as guaranteeing the separation of church and state and applying that interpretation to the states (Hamburger 2002:454-63). In his majority decision in *Everson*, Justice Hugo Black made an explicit connection between the Constitution and language used by Thomas Jefferson in an 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association: “In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect ‘a wall of separation between church and state’” (1947).

Jefferson’s words preceded the first use of “secularism” as the separation of church and state by nearly seventy-five years. This usage appears to arise in the United States in 1876, with the formation of the National Liberal League to oppose the National Reform Association and their push for a Christian Amendment to the Constitution

(Wenger 2010:90). In the pages of *The Index*, founded as the official journal of the Free Religious Association, editor Francis Ellingwood Abbot drew a distinction between philosophical and political secularism. The former refers to a philosophical and ethical system founded by British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 (and elaborated further in the third subsection below). The latter notion, political secularism, is an American innovation, as Abbot borrowed Holyoake's term while seeking a way to describe what he first called "liberalism," derived from "liberal" in the sense of "free," as it pertained to the "free religion" movement in which he and his journal were instrumental (1872). In 1876, writing in the year's first issue of *The Index*, Abbot took "secularism" from philosophy to politics, just as he had done with free religion and liberalism:

The religion of every free State is free religion; and free religion, on its political side, is absolute secularism -- the absolute restriction of government to the transaction of all public affairs by the simple rules of intelligence, justice, liberty, and equal rights, and the absolute exclusion of all rules introducing revelations or supernaturalisms or ecclesiasticisms of any sort. *This is the common religion of mankind*. Every special religion pretends to include it, but crucifies it in the act. (1876:15)

Abbot makes a transitive connection between free religion as a religion or philosophy, free religion as politics, and in turn, secularism as the political arm of free religion.

Abbot's understanding of the secular did not exclude religion, but rather, it was a new form of religion suitable for all. As with Holyoake's secularism, many of its adherents considered it a religion—free religion—and it was only much later that it came to be understood as above the sectarian fray rather than itself sectarian. The importance of Abbot's innovation for contemporary usage of secularism and the secular is difficult to understate given that separation of church and state has become perhaps the primary

definition of secularism. That mainstream newspapers, books, and magazines do not begin using secularism as separation until after World War II indicates that much of its story remains to be told.

In recent years, scholars have urged a reappraisal of secularism that frames it less as the *separation* of church and state, and more as a description of the various ways in which church and state *relate*. In Alfred Stepan's work on "multiple secularisms," he understands secularism as a variable relationship between the state, religion, and society (2011:115). In their edited volume, *Secularisms*, Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini use the idea of "multiple or varied secularisms" to attend to cultural and religious variation and disrupt the simple binary of religious and secular (2008:14-16). Elizabeth Shakman Hurd has offered an alternative taxonomy of secularisms, distinguishing between two types: a laicism that sees religion "as an adversary and an impediment to modern politics" and a Judeo-Christian secularism that sees religion "as a source of unity and identity that generates conflict in modern international politics" (2008:23). By demonstrating that the impetus for separation of church and state in nineteenth-century America was often deeply Protestant and motivated in part by nativist anti-Catholicism, others have, like Hurd, suggested that secularism is more religious than it seems (Fessenden 2007; Hamburger 2002; Modern 2011).

American secular activists are strong advocates of a form of secularism that Stepan would consider separationist and Hurd would call laicist. Religion and politics have an adversarial relationship in this model, and religion's influence on politics is detrimental to a healthy democracy. During an interview at SCA's offices, one of its staff members emphasized this view by paraphrasing the organization's mission statement:

“Separation of church and state is the best guarantee of freedom for all.” Organizations like the Freedom From Religion Foundation, American Atheists, the Center for Inquiry, and the American Humanist Association have full-time staff who investigate potential violations of the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment, send letters threatening legal action, and rely on in-house or volunteer lawyers to file lawsuits and amicus briefs.

Attorneys for these organizations sometimes work with groups like the ACLU and Americans United for Separation of Church and State to coordinate legal action, though they also compete for plaintiffs because a successful lawsuit brings publicity, and in turn, donations. Leaders I interviewed at three of the major organizations lamented the lack of coordination among attorneys filing separationist lawsuits. They felt that the more litigious organizations were too willing to file suits they might lose, thereby setting bad precedent and making it more difficult to bring future cases concerning the same or similar issues. While organizations might not agree on the means of pursuing the separation of church and state, they generally agree that the wall of separation should be strong and high.

2. The Secular Character of American Government:

The Secular Public Sphere

Lupu also introduced the idea of the secular as “a separate space, apart from religion, in which institutions may operate.” Private beliefs must remain largely restricted from this public space, and they should not enter into considerations like whether to teach evolution. For example, Lupu argued that evolution ought to be taught in public schools as a matter of its being accepted science, and any implications evolution may have for an

understanding of the existence of God should be bracketed from classroom conversation. This includes both atheistic and positive statements of belief concerning God's existence. In other words, the espousal of one's privately held secular beliefs regarding the existence of God should remain out of secular public space inasmuch as they should not issue from those who represent the state and carry with them the weight of its authority.

By invoking the distinction between public presentation and private belief in order to separate secularism and atheism, Lupu pointed to the blurry boundary between separating church and state and delimiting a secular public sphere. High school science teachers who represent the state in their professional capacity offer a clearer example of those who should avoid religious rationales than do politicians who represent their constituencies as well as the state. Legal scholar Kent Greenawalt has attempted to delineate with rigorous precision how and whether judges, legislators, and private citizens ought to rely on religious reasons in their public arguments and decisions (1995). The complexity of Greenawalt's account points to the challenge of drawing a sharp distinction between public and private, and in turn, secular and religious. These challenges have led some scholars to reconsider how and whether religion should be excluded from public political discourse (Stout 2004, Butler et al. 2011) and even whether a secular public sphere remains a useful notion (Calhoun 2011).

SCA has developed a criterion for assessing whether and how private religious beliefs ought to impact the decisions of policy makers. Among SCA's three official issues expressly concerning government, two relate directly to the separation of church and state, and the third is better understood as relating to the secular public sphere. SCA lists the focuses of its opposition as follows:

The government and officials acting in their government capacity, should not endorse religious beliefs, one religion over another or religion over non-religion.

1. National Ceremonies and Symbols Endorsing Religion: Patriotic exercises that reference “God” are direct government endorsements of religion.
 - a. In God We Trust
 - b. National day of prayer
 - c. Oaths of office
 - d. Pledge of Allegiance
2. Government Officials Endorsing Religion: Legislators should not profess their personal religious beliefs when acting in their official capacity.
 - a. Legislative prayer
 - b. Prayer caucus
3. Religiously Based Policy: Government officials should rely on high quality research, not personal religious beliefs, when making policy decisions. (SCA, “Issues”)

In grouping these positions together, SCA elides a distinction between the separation of church and state and the establishment or maintenance of a secular public sphere. The third category, in particular, raises the same questions Greenawalt addresses concerning how private conscience should influence public decisions. In SCA’s view, the secular public sphere should regulate the presence and role of religion for those acting as government officials.

According to members of SCA’s staff and its board of directors, the third category doubles as a guiding criterion for SCA’s selection of the issues it supports. In the words of one of its leaders, SCA “will take a stand when someone is for something, where they shouldn’t be basing their evidence on religion.” SCA’s Executive Director, Edwina Rogers, echoed this statement in a presentation she gave to an atheist group in New York City in May of 2012. When Rogers asked SCA’s board why it supported certain issues and not others, they told her that the organization is only concerned with issues that policy makers decide based on their religious beliefs. SCA uses a thought experiment to identify which issues it supports and which it avoids. If someone could come to the

conclusion through “high quality research, not personal religious beliefs” that abortion is both right and wrong, or that same-sex marriage is both right and wrong, then SCA will not take a stand on the issue. In the cases of abortion and climate change, SCA is silent; on same-sex marriage, SCA is in support. Because it is not obvious what constitutes “high quality research” and “personal religious beliefs,” these terms become the regulative conditions of the public sphere’s secularity. In turn, this version of secularism becomes the regulative condition of religion (see Hurd 2008).

During interviews, SCA’s leaders described this criterion as a practical way of avoiding controversial issues that might alienate those who would otherwise support their mission, such as atheists who do not support abortion and justify their position with scientific research. Though this indicates that the criterion might be a pragmatic way to minimize internal conflict, it is important that SCA justifies it according to the values of a secular public sphere. The criterion is not just an internal rule of thumb meant to reduce conflict, but it is an externally expressed value that justifies SCA’s decisions as much as it guides them. Not only does SCA’s mission include the protection and strengthening of the “secular character of American government,” but that secular character includes both the separation of church and state and the secularity of the public sphere.

A number of organizational leaders whom I interviewed see the early to mid-2000s as a turning point for secular activism because it was a time when many Americans began to perceive the impact religion can have on politics (also see Hout and Fischer 2002). Jill, who holds a position at a prominent humanist organization, described how she became involved with the freethought group on her college campus:

I was an activist in college. I got involved with a group called the [Georgetown] University Freethinkers. [...] That became my life. I decided, you know what, I

am an atheist, and it is so important for me to stop this intrusion of religion in the public sphere. It was happening in college. I could see it happening in everyday life, and I wanted to make a difference that way.

Jill sees the public sphere as a space that extends beyond the domain of the state and includes her private university. Her concern for the secularity of the public sphere is distinct from her concern for the separation of church and state. Graduating from Georgetown in 2005, Jill's entry into secular activism coincided with public attempts to credit religion for the World Trade Center attacks and the two elections of George W. Bush. Though Jill's experience with her college freethought organization no doubt influenced her decision to become a full-time secular activist, her desire to preserve the secular public sphere plays a major role in her personal history.

According to another leader at the same humanist organization where Jill works, fundraising became much easier in the mid-2000s because they were "tapping into an environment where Bush was president and the Christian Right was everywhere." Ben, a leader at a major atheist organization, agrees that it was a watershed moment:

September 11th was huge for us. It was a religious event. When George W. Bush made it Christians versus Muslims—when he basically said the solution to this was more Christianity and really started to pipe in the faith-based initiatives and really started to push the God part from the office—George W. Bush did very well for us. He did lousy for the country, but he did very well for organized atheism. He made everybody see how bad it is when somebody pretty and stupid and religious gets into power.

Philip, who founded a local organization in the New York City area, dated his involvement to an earlier period, citing the "Gingrich Revolution," and seeing the early 1990s as the years in which the Religious Right rose to prominence. Two leaders I interviewed from a national secular humanist organization dated the rise of the Religious Right to even an earlier moment, in the 1980s. Though religion became salient for

different leaders at different times, they consistently identified its threat to the secular public sphere as a turning point for secular activism.

3. Secularism as the Ideology of Nonbelief

Todd Stiefel,² one of the major financial backers of secular activism in the United States, drew a similar distinction to the one Lupu drew between atheism and secularism:

Secularism tends to be misunderstood. There are two definitions of secular, one being the lack of religion. But secularism is more often associated with the lack of religion in government. From a strategic-movement level that people are pointing out, the Religious Right is trying to equate secularism with atheism so they can demonize it. Secularism is something broader than that politically. It includes the deists and the Reverend Barry Lynn [Executive Director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State] and a whole army of religious people who believe in secular government.

As soon as the topic of secularism arose during our interview, Stiefel wanted to clarify that it was not the same as atheism. Like Lupu, by pre-emptively parsing secularism, Stiefel drew attention to a definition that he sought to avoid and demonstrated that he was aware of contemporary debates over its meaning. Understanding the origins of secularism as a term and concept will help explain why Stiefel finds it important to deny that secularism is the ideology of nonbelief.

George Jacob Holyoake first coined the word secularism in print in response to a letter to the editor from Edward Search, published in the June 25th, 1851 issue of Holyoake's journal, *The Reasoner* (1851:87-88). Search was a pseudonym used by Holyoake's friend and benefactor, W.H. Ashurst, who argued in his letter that given the limits of knowledge, no one could be certain that God does not exist—a skeptical position that would become known as agnosticism once Thomas Huxley coined the term

² Stiefel is one of several activists whom I interviewed who has explicitly requested that I identify him by name.

in 1869 (Holland 2007). Looking for a more suitable label than “Atheist,” Ashurst suggested “Secularist,” from which Holyoake extrapolated “Secularism” to describe “the work we have always had in hand, and how it is larger than Atheism, and includes it” (1851:88) Throughout the rest of his life, Holyoake attempted to distinguish secularism from atheism so as to preserve that sense of agnosticism, and also to incorporate other valences that he believed atheism could not adequately capture. In a letter declining the Vice-Presidency of the National Secular Society in Britain, Holyoake criticized the organization for thinking “Atheism is identical with Secularism,” and stated further that “the essential difference between Secularism and Atheism” is “so important to keep clear” (McCabe 1908:58).

Writing in *English Secularism* in 1896, Holyoake foregrounded the moral dimension that secularism adds to non-theism:

The term Secularism was chosen to express the extension of freethought to ethics. [...] Secularism is a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human, and intended mainly for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable. Its essential principles are three: 1. The improvement of this life by material means. 2. That science is the available Providence of man. 3. That it is good to do good. (34-35)

Here Holyoake outlines a philosophy that is centered on the natural world (as opposed to the supernatural), emphasizes morality, and valorizes science as the method and means for accomplishing the morally good. Holyoake wanted “secularism” to provide a positive statement of belief, as opposed to “atheism,” which he thought could only express the lack of belief in God. Though many organized nonbelievers in America today would use “humanism” to describe the set of values Holyoake describes, Stiefel’s pre-emptive denial points to the persistence of secularism as a term for the ideology of nonbelief. In Lupu’s case, he saw that the two halves of the Secular Coalition for America’s mission

use “secular” to unite both advocacy for non-theists and the separation of religion and government. In tacitly conflating the two, SCA invokes secularism’s original meaning.

As outlined above, American secularism split into philosophical and political secularism in the 1870s, giving rise to the possibility of Stiefel’s distinction. Unlike Holyoake, who recognized no distinction within secularism, certain secular activists want political secularism to be a big tent category that can unify nonbelievers and believers in support of the separation of church and state—regardless of whether individuals consider themselves spiritual, religious, or non-religious. In his presentation at the House briefing, Lupu offered a slightly different but similarly broad notion of the secular that includes spiritual and religious Americans who believe “government should be secular.” Lupu shares his view with Georgetown University Professor Jacques Berlinerblau, whose book, *How to Be Secular: A Call to Arms for Religious Freedom*, was published just before the House briefing, in September of 2012. Berlinerblau argues that his understanding of secularism “seems powerful, precise, and the most conducive to its survival”:

Secularism is a political philosophy, which, at its core, is preoccupied with, and often deeply suspicious of, any and all relations between government and religion. It translates that preoccupation into various strategies of governance, all of which seek to balance two necessities: (1) the individual citizen’s need for freedom of, or freedom from, religion, and (2) a state’s need to maintain order. (2012:xvi)

Berlinerblau, like Stiefel, wants secularism to be broadly inclusive so that the separation of church and state can be an important issue for many Americans and not just nonbelievers. Though Stiefel is an openly strong supporter of SCA, he remains concerned about the polysemy of the secular and the conflation of non-theism and the separation of church and state. Yet as this paper’s concluding section makes clear, the secular’s polysemy is crucial for SCA’s attempts to balance its commitment to both halves of its

mission: to advocate for non-theists and to strengthen the secular character of American government.

The briefing's third panelist, Greg Epstein, most clearly elided a distinction between non-theism and secularism. Epstein is the Humanist Chaplain at Harvard University and author of *Good Without God*, a book that argues that humanism, much like Holyoake's secularism, articulates the positive, moral beliefs of nonbelievers (2009). Throughout his presentation, Epstein linked humanism and the secular, at times switching back and forth between the labels without drawing any distinction: "Humanists and secular Americans are people with strong positive values [...] We're putting our values in action. Those are secular values. That's humanism. The only reason we need a congressional briefing today is that most people don't understand what secular Americans are about." Epstein's elision is common for organized nonbelievers who consider themselves part of the "secular movement," though not all organized nonbelievers choose to identify themselves as "secular." Some activists I interviewed argue that there are multiple, overlapping movements that include atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists, and other kinds of nonbelievers. While organized nonbelievers sometimes talk about the "humanist movement," the "secular movement," or the "atheist movement," no one term can fully capture the heterogeneity that certain subgroups of nonbelievers continually reassert (see Calhoun 1994). The following subsection will look at the special role activists' framing of the secular plays in their growing efforts to form an identity-based social movement.

4. Secular Identity

One of the most influential leaders in contemporary secular activism was the second panelist at SCA's House briefing, David Niose. Though Niose has been the President of SCA since January 2013, he was President of the American Humanist Association at the time of the briefing and is currently the lead attorney in a case before the Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court challenging the presence of "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance (*Doe v. Acton Boxborough Regional School District*). In a book published just three months before SCA's House briefing, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans*, Niose outlines an argument for the existence of an identity-oriented social movement constructed by and for secular Americans (2012). According to Niose, more Americans than ever have become involved in secular activism in the twenty-first century, and many nonbelievers are now publicly emphasizing their secular identities (2012:145-148).

Self-reported growth in membership, budget, and staff of the major organizations supports Niose's claims, as do survey data on Americans' religious affiliations. According to the results of a poll released by the Pew Research Center in October of 2012, one-in-five Americans have no religious affiliation, an increase of nearly a third since 2007 (Pew Forum). The figure is much greater for those under thirty, with nearly one-third (32%) choosing not to identify with any religion. The number of those identifying as atheist or agnostic has increased by half in the last five years, now comprising six percent of the population. A little more than two-thirds of those with no affiliation say they believe in God (68%), and more than a third consider themselves spiritual but not religious (37%). The number of Americans who are non-theistic and the number of those who do not affiliate with any religion are on the rise, and trends among those under thirty suggest that

growth will continue.

Asking whether or not these Americans are “secular” gets at the heart of the ambiguity of a secular identity. For Niose, secular Americans are only those who are “personally secular,” by which he means those who are non-theistic in their private belief, but who may or may not identify with markers like atheist, humanist, agnostic, or secularist (2012:11-13). Though he goes so far as to suggest that those Americans who “sympathize with a secular worldview” while believing in some supernatural concepts might be counted among secular Americans, he leaves the question open (2012:15). As mentioned in the previous section, Lupu and Berlinerblau both argue for an alternative and more capacious understanding of secular that includes spiritual and religious Americans who support the separation of church and state. That Niose and Berlinerblau should publish their books within four months of the first-ever Congressional briefing concerning the secular is no coincidence. Competition over the framing of the secular and secularism has intensified at a time when more Americans than ever are claiming no religious affiliation, identifying openly as non-theistic, and becoming involved with secular activism.

For his panel presentation, SCA asked Niose to speak about the “secular movement,” which he argued is less than a decade old. He described this movement as “a demographic emergence—an awakening of various types of non-religious Americans who are tired of being overlooked in public dialogue and society generally.” As he does in *Nonbeliever Nation*, Niose argued that secular Americans must respond to the rise of the Religious Right by emphasizing collective identity or “group pride.” He described a recent shift in attitude among nonbelievers, where “Maybe people used to get up and say,

‘I’m a conservative,’ ‘I’m a liberal,’ ‘a feminist,’ ‘gay.’ Now they’re getting up and saying, ‘I’m an atheist.’ [...] There’s a movement to normalize atheism across the country.” In the question and answer period, he reiterated the need for public secularism: “This is what the secular movement is all about. [...] We need this secular demographic that deserves respect to also stand up. There’s an entire demographic that’s being discriminated against.”

As he writes in *Nonbeliever Nation*, Niose wants secular Americans to “come out.” He borrows this idea from other secular activists, who in turn, borrowed it from the LGBT rights movement (Niose 2012:89-92,127-29). J.M. Smith and Cimino and Smith have examined this appropriation in greater depth in their discussions of atheist identity (Smith 2013:84-85; Cimino and Smith 2007:421). Niose is rare among activists in urging nonbelievers to “come out” as explicitly “secular.” While many organized nonbelievers with whom I spoke identify as secular and see it as a useful umbrella category, most do not use it as their primary label. One young leader who does identify strongly as a “secularist” explained to me his reasoning:

I consider myself secularist because I'm really in support of separation of church and state and not having religion influence public life. Recently I've become more friendly to the term secularist, and I really think that's because my focus has been more on the influence of religion on public life. If that's what I'm mainly concerned with, I just tell people I'm a secular person, or I'm a secularist. I don't really care what you believe personally so long as you're not forcing it on anyone else.

By contrast, another leader named Charles who works at the Secular Student Alliance explained to me why he identifies first and foremost as an atheist:

I think that atheist is certainly the most politically charged word, and because of that, I’m quick to use it when I’m talking about myself in public. If I don’t use “atheist,” people think I’m being bashful. It’s just better to come out and say it. [...] If I’m on an airplane and someone asks me what I do, I say, “I’m a

professional atheist.”

When meeting someone new, Charles chooses to commit a political act that advocates for nonbelievers by calling himself “atheist,” rather than leave his identity ambiguous by using the term “secular”—despite its appearing in the name of the organization for which he works. Because of the secular’s polysemy, SCA often faces a similar decision: Should it frame the secular as non-theistic, should it leave the question open, or should it frame it as the separation of church and state or the appropriate type of public sphere? The following section demonstrates how SCA employs all of these options in attempting to fulfill the two sides of its mission.

The Work of a Polysemous Secular

SCA and the secular movement as a whole use the polysemy of the secular as a way to align its various meanings when consensus is required and to distinguish between them when targeting specific sub-groups with narrower interests (on frame alignment, see Snow et al 1986). When unifying its member organizations, SCA understands secular as an umbrella category for all non-theists. When lobbying alongside the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, secularism is the separation of church and state. And when SCA’s President and other secular activists want to create a big tent for mobilizing as many Americans as possible, secular can refer to spiritual or theistic Americans with no religious affiliation. Looking at a few examples in addition to those already discussed will make clear the political advantages of a polysemous secular.

SCA is aware of the secular’s polysemy and navigates it carefully in its public materials. In the “Vision” statement of its Secular Decade plan, SCA describes the

America it would like to see: “An America that has returned to its secular roots and where secularism is an influential, respected force in American civic life, and in which there are numerous openly nontheistic elected officials” (Faircloth 2010:1). In this one sentence, SCA creates a bridge between the two sides of its mission by moving from “secular roots” and the implied tradition of the separation of church and state, to a phrase about secularism that could imply either separation or nonbelief, and finally to an explicit reference to non-theists. All of this work hinges on an implication that there are secular values (that follow from non-theism), there are secular values (that undergird secular government), and there is a relationship between the two.

One of the secondary goals in creating SCA was to unite the national nonbeliever organizations, some of which are effectively sects of one another that have arisen from disputes among leadership. Despite fighting for many years over members and donors, the sixteen member organizations now share the financial burden of supporting SCA and send members to annual meetings of the board. SCA brings together a wide range of nonbelievers through its member organizations. In an interview, the leader of one organization described his members as “the marines of the atheist movement,” while another leader told me that most of her members consider themselves religious. Even the Council for Secular Humanism is now a member organization, though it took Paul Kurtz’s marginalization and eventual ouster from the Center for Inquiry for it to join. In 1973, Kurtz left his position at the American Humanist Association and founded a number of organizations in the ensuing years, including the Council for Secular Humanism in 1980. Throughout his tenure as head of the Center for Inquiry, an umbrella for all of Kurtz’s organizations, he consciously avoided collaboration, and at times, he

tried to annex organizations that he saw as competitors. Kurtz's successor, Ronald Lindsay, is more interested in collaboration and gave approval for the Council for Secular Humanism to join SCA in 2010.

Though a polysemous secular helps SCA create a big tent, drawing distinctions at key moments is necessary for working with allies who might only agree with part of its mission. Recruiting member organizations, seeking allied and endorsing organizations, and presenting itself in coalitions alongside other lobbying groups all require different combinations of the secular. For instance, some of SCA's member organizations consider themselves religious, albeit non-theistic. The American Ethical Union, the Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the HUManists are all registered with the federal government as religious non-profits and understand themselves as religions.³ They see no contradiction in being both religious and non-theistic, and many of their members prefer to call themselves religious humanists. All three of these groups could be accurately described as secular religions; they are religious members of the Secular Coalition for America.

When the American Ethical Union was considering joining SCA, its name, mission, vision, and issues were all important considerations. Two leaders whom I interviewed told me that members of the Ethical movement were hesitant to ally themselves with an organization that considers itself "secular" given the wide range of connotations the term carries. For a time, Ethical Culture leaders were stuck on the wording of SCA's name and felt they could only join if SCA would change it to the

³ The American Ethical Union is the umbrella organization for independently run Ethical Culture Societies throughout the United States. The Society for Humanistic Judaism has the same relationship to its independent Societies. The HUManists are an association of Unitarian Universalist Humanists who consider themselves religious humanists and operate within UU congregations.

Coalition for a Secular America. This would allow Ethical Culture to be a member of a coalition that supports a secular America but is not itself secular. SCA refused the change, and in 2008, the American Ethical Union set aside its concerns and became a member organization. Ultimately, the AEU felt it could agree with SCA's mission, as the majority of its members consider themselves non-theists who support the separation of church and state.

During the briefing's question and answer period, one House staffer sought to clarify the distinction between atheism and secularism and asked whether SCA chooses "to focus on the secular component" when lobbying. She observed that "even people who are extremely religious don't want to recite something of another religion," and wondered how and whether SCA emphasizes the separation of church and state. The implication of her question, as she phrased it, was that she thought combining advocacy for non-theists and the separation of church and state might undermine separation. Niose responded to her question by noting that SCA works with groups like the ACLU, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and People for the American Way in an effort to build coalitions with religious moderates to combat the Religious Right. Its mission to promote separation allows SCA to work alongside even avowedly religious organizations like the Baptist Joint Committee and the Interfaith Alliance. By participating in coalitions, SCA gains access to prominent politicians in ways that might not otherwise be available to an organization that lobbies for non-theists. For instance, SCA works with the Coalition Against Religious Discrimination, which has dozens of member organizations across a range of sectors. One SCA staffer told me that these relations can sometimes become tense because, for instance, other members of a coalition might not appreciate publicized

anti-religious remarks by Richard Dawkins. She also emphasized that such coalitions are very beneficial for a relatively small and new lobbying operation like SCA.

While many of SCA's coalition partners support separation, its advocacy for America's non-theists is what makes SCA distinct and able to attract the nonbeliever organizations from which it primarily draws its support. Many nonbelievers, especially those who actively organize, are conscious of and concerned with discrimination against secular Americans. According to a study conducted in 2006, Americans are less accepting of atheists than any other group, including more salient bogeymen like gays, Muslims, and Jews (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Speaking to a group of student leaders at a conference I attended in Columbus, Ohio, Edwina Rogers told her audience that SCA's "mission is to increase the visibility of nonbelievers and to fight for equal rights." Having advocates communicate their interests to state and national governments appeals to non-theists for the same reason a secular identity does: it normalizes their beliefs by officializing them and brings their voices into the public sphere. For organizations like American Atheists, who have a reputation for taking iconoclastic and confrontational positions, a unified secular identity in the form of SCA also provides them indirect access to government officials who would otherwise likely spurn them.

In his final remarks during the briefing, Greg Epstein drew a distinction between two kinds of secular: one with an uppercase S and one with a lowercase s. Whereas the former denotes the secular movement, the latter denotes the broad range of values for which it fights and which many religious Americans share. Epstein concluded that SCA needs partners who share its *secular* values as much as its *Secular* values. In order to advocate for non-theists, SCA depends on broad-based coalitions and requires the support

of more than just non-theistic Americans. To fulfill both halves of its mission, SCA makes use of a polysemous secular that allows it to conflate and distinguish between multiple meanings depending on the context.

By identifying and elaborating specific sites in which actors challenge the limits of what the secular can mean and the work those meanings can accomplish, this paper documents the making and re-making of the contemporary American secular. In doing so, it participates in Talal Asad's "more modest endeavor," demonstrating who defines the secular, in what context, how, and why. In turn, this paper brings the theoretical insights of the study of secularism and the secular into conversation with the scholarship now emerging from the social science of nonbelievers. Approaches that argue against or ignore certain understandings of the secular, or that impose an understanding that claims to cut across or contain all other understandings, obscure the work that a polysemous secular already accomplishes. Attending carefully to the polysemy and variety of terms and labels used by organized nonbelievers and secular activists reveals how these terms both respond to and enable new kinds of political action while influencing what scholars and the mainstream public mean and understand by the secular's many invocations.

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