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Secularism, Humanism, and Secular Humanism: Terms and Institutions

Abstract:

This chapter considers recent American attempts to recognize secular humanism as a religion in light of more than a century of debates over the religiosity of secularism and humanism. It offers a history of these terms' codependent evolution in the United States by focusing on the individuals, groups, and institutions that have adopted them and shaped their meanings. The chapter also argues that those who use these terms today bear forth a fraught and sometimes self-contradicting inheritance. In order to recognize the stakes of contemporary struggles over the meaning and purpose of secularism, one needs a deeper understanding of how the term has come to bear its traces and how it fits within a shifting constellation of labels and concepts.

Keywords: Secularism, Humanism, Secular Humanism, Organized Nonbelievers, Secular Activism, Separation of Church and State

In October of 2014, a federal district judge in the state of Oregon ruled that secular humanism is a religion, at least for legal purposes involving the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment. The judge sided with the lawsuits' plaintiffs, who argued that a humanist inmate at a federal prison should receive certain rights reserved solely for religious groups. The decision arrived a year after the U.S. Army began recognizing humanism as a religious preference, and in the lawsuit's wake, the Federal Bureau of Prisons granted the same formal recognition. This was not the first time that federal courts have called secular humanism a religion, nor does it settle the question of its religiosity for humanists and their opponents. It did, however, signal a victory for humanists who consider

themselves religious and for those who affiliate with the American Humanist Association, whose members mostly identify as secular.

For other avowedly secular humanists, and especially for those affiliated with the Center for Inquiry, the court's decision is a source of anxiety. They fear a return to the hard-fought battles of the 1970s and 80s in which "secular humanism" was a bugaboo that provided religious and political conservatives with leverage to attack the neutrality of secularism and secular education. These conservatives argued in courtrooms and legislatures that secular humanism is a religion and that its norms pervade the secular state in violation of the Establishment Clause. For secular humanists who hoped those debates were over, recent declarations of secular humanism's religiosity are cause for alarm, and they draw attention once again to conflicts over what humanism is, what secularism is, and how both relate to religion.

In this chapter, I will explain their concerns by providing a partial history of the closely related terms "secularism," "humanism," and "secular humanism." I will also give an account of several of the American institutions that adopted these terms as their identifying labels. In so doing, it will become clear that secularism, humanism, and secular humanism have been fought over for a long time and used in a variety of ways (see also Blankholm 2014). By charting their English-language evolution, this chapter accounts for traces that each term bears and helps explain the fraught commitments that those who use them sometimes unwittingly inherit. Though it might seem curious at first to focus so centrally on humanism in order to shed light on secularism, this chapter maps a terrain that includes them both and helps us understand how we arrived at present conflicts and what remains at stake in their solution. Ultimately, I leave it to readers to assess the seriousness of dangers that might attend calling secular humanism a religion. The aim of this chapter is far more modest: to provide an historical overview of the uses of these terms and some of the people and institutions who have adopted them in order to make manifest the working assumptions of contemporary debates and the tortuous paths they have followed to the present.

Secularism Becomes an -ism

Because other scholars in this volume also explore the nineteenth-century origins of the term “secularism,” this chapter provides only a brief overview before focusing on humanism and the two terms’ co-evolution. Secularism, as an -ism, was first coined by British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake in 1851 (Search 1851; Holyoake 1896a). “Freethinker” was a common nineteenth-century label for a variety of religious and political dissenters, including, among others, atheists, rationalists, spiritualists, and socialists (Jacoby 2004: 4). Like many British freethinkers, Holyoake apprenticed in a trade, working under his father as a tinsmith before becoming active in the socialist circles of northern England. Following six months in prison for a blasphemy conviction, he moved to London, where he took over as editor of *The Reasoner*, the journal through which he founded and organized the Secularist movement (Royle 1974). With the term “Secularism,” which he capitalized, Holyoake wanted to distinguish his ideas from atheism, which he considered too certain in its denial of God. Agnosticism would not be coined by Thomas Huxley until nearly twenty years later, in 1869 (Holland 2007).

Over the half century in which Holyoake promoted Secularism, he expanded and refined its definition. In a later work, he offers a succinct version:

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 (1896b: 34-35).

Holyoake opposed his Secularism to theology, but its relationship with religion was more ambiguous. At times, he would describe it as rejecting or superseding religion; at others, he acknowledged that Secularism could be a kind of religion depending on how one understands the term. Quoting an essay that John Stuart Mill wrote on Auguste Comte, he uses “religion” in “the modern sense” of “binding” one to duty,

morality, and humanity—distinct from binding one to God (1896b: 80). “Religion,” in this usage, defined an ethics established through the bonds one has with others.

Open Court Publishing Co. published Holyoake’s *English Secularism* because it recognized a complex, yet fruitful relationship between Secularism and religion. Writing in the work’s preface, the publisher’s manager, Paul Carus, distinguishes Open Court’s mission from Holyoake’s and advocates for “the reformation of religion and religious institutions” rather than their opposition (1896b: xi). He argues that Secularism’s “antagonism to the religion of dogmatism does not bode destruction but advance. It represents the transition to a purer conception of religion. (1896b: xi). According to Carus, this kind of religion sacralizes the secular rather than separates the sacred and secular spheres. “Religion” imbues the everyday with meaning and points to deeper truths, but it does not contradict what science learns about nature. With fellow travelers like Carus, Holyoake remained sensitive to religion’s polysemy and the nuances of its complicated relationship with Secularism. Holyoake understood that in some senses “religion” could describe his Secularism, and in others, the two were opposed.

Holyoake further distinguished between his Secularism and “Secular instruction,” where the former is a set of beliefs about the world that should not be taught as truth in schools, and the latter is a way of approaching pedagogy that brackets the sorts of moral claims that Secularism and theology make. These subtleties are worth dwelling on because they show us that the tensions haunting secularism and the secular today were present at the term’s beginning and acknowledged by the man who invented it to describe his worldview and the movement he led. In a passage that opens *English Secularism*, Holyoake draws distinctions worthy of a 1980s courtroom debate over the religiosity of secularism humanism:

One purpose of these chapters is to explain how unfounded are the objections of many excellent Christians to Secular instruction in State, public, or board schools. The Secular is distinct from theology, which it neither ignores, assails, nor denies. Things Secular are as separate from the Church

as land from the ocean. And what nobody seems to discern is that things Secular are in themselves quite distinct from Secularism. The Secular is a mode of instruction; Secularism is a code of conduct. Secularism does conflict with theology; Secularist teaching would, but Secular instruction does not (1896b: 1).

Making no mention of the coincidence of their shared root, Holyoake carefully distinguishes between his Secularism, which he analogizes to theology, and Secular things and Secular instruction, which are “secular” more in the sense of *this-worldly* and *neutral* than Secularist. Holyoake promoted both Secularism and secular instruction, but he did not believe that the latter rested upon or required the former. Updating Holyoake’s parlance to a contemporary idiom, we might say that one need not be a humanist to advocate for the separation of church and state and the secularity of public education. Touching briefly on the shared root of worldview and political secularisms (see also Quack in this volume), in the pages that follow I offer a wide-ranging history that helps to explain why Holyoake and American secular humanists share such similar concerns. In the process, I show some of the reasons why secularism’s polysemy remains a source of conflict today.

Humanism, Unitarianism, and the Free Religious Association

As an -ism, “humanism” was introduced in the early nineteenth century as a variant of the term, “humanist,” which was coined a little more than three hundred years prior “to designate a teacher and student of the ‘humanities’ or *studia humanitatis*” (Kristeller 2007: 113). As it was first used, humanism described “devotion to the literatures of ancient Greece and Rome, and the humane values that may be derived from them” (Mann 2004: 1-2). This remains the understanding that organizes the scholarly study of Renaissance humanism. As an English-language term for a human-centered view of the world that does not affirm traditional views of theism or the supernatural, it dates to at least the mid-nineteenth century. In *The Essence of Christianity* (1841) and *Principles of Philosophy of the Future* (1843), Ludwig

Feuerbach argues that objects are only real in their relationship to humans. By extension, God is an object made real through the human subject. In a sense, Feuerbach inverts the roles of God and man, ceding creative power to the latter even while reasserting the importance of religion and man's relationship with God. The term "humanism" appears in English translations of and commentaries on Feuerbach's work, but as the Oxford English Dictionary observes, it is also a term adopted by his critics. In his 1853 book *Infidelity: Its Aspect, Causes, and Agency*, Reverend Thomas Pearson calls Feuerbach and his student Karl Grün "the great teachers of humanism," which he describes as "a system which finds everything in man, which ignores all power but the human will, and which is as intolerant of the existence of religion as of private property" (390). Humanism is not yet a philosophy in its own right, but a term available to describe a view of the world in which the human, as opposed to God, is central. Like the term "secular humanism" in the United States in the mid-twentieth century, "humanism" in the mid-nineteenth is more epithet than self-appellation.

Writing in 1870 for the third edition of his *Principles of Secularism*, Holyoake describes humanism as one of the four "leading ideas of Secularism," along with moralism, materialism, and "utilitarian unity" (28). He elaborates only briefly on his understanding of the term "humanism," describing it as "the physical perfection of this life" (28). His understanding of humanism is similar to Feuerbach's so-called "humanism": the human is both the measure and the aim. Holyoake writes: "Secularism," of which humanism is a part, "relates to the present existence of man, and to action, the issues of which can be tested by the experience of this life—having for its objects the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest perceivable point" (11). In Holyoake's framework, humanism is still not a freestanding system of thought. It fits within Secularism, referring positively to one of its central ideas.

Holyoake's Secularism was well known among the Americans who founded the Free Religious Association (FRA), a group that was a forerunner of the avowedly humanist groups that arose in the 1920s (see Olds 1996; Radest 1969). The FRA was formed in 1867, in response to the 1865 and 1866 national conventions of the

American Unitarian Association, during which Unitarian leaders like Henry Whitney Bellows pressed for the adoption of an explicitly Christian platform (Vaca 2013). More theologically radical Unitarians, such as Octavius Brooks Frothingham, William James Potter, and Francis Ellingwood Abbot, sought to form an association that could provide a big tent for a wide range of religious views while prioritizing the principles of free inquiry and individual judgment (Olds 1996; Potter 1892). Frothingham became the organization's first president, and Ralph Waldo Emerson was the first to sign as a member (Warren 1943). The group was eclectic, with its initial officers coming from Unitarianism, Universalism, Quakerism, Spiritualism, Judaism, and the "Unchurched" (Potter 1892: 15). According to its first Constitution, the FRA was organized "to promote the interests of pure religion, to encourage the scientific study of theology, and to increase fellowship in the spirit" (Potter 1892: 16). It was also organized so that membership was not exclusive; those joining the FRA could be members of other groups, including the American Unitarian Association.

In 1873, Frothingham published *The Religion of Humanity*, in which he develops a theology that aids in providing a bridge between Unitarianism and the avowedly non-Christian, nontheistic religious humanism of the twentieth century. Frothingham takes his title from Auguste Comte's positivist religion, which Comte also called the Religion of Humanity (Comte 1858). In a book with no kind words for Catholicism, Frothingham finds Comte's system insufficiently free of its origins: "The Church of Humanity was modeled in every respect on the Catholic plan. [...] It is the Roman Church over again without its theology" (Frothingham 1873: 33). In his own Religion of Humanity, Frothingham seeks to correct what Comte has "corrupted and perverted" (33). Unlike Comte, his theology self-consciously re-inscribes Christianity more than it attempts to replace it.

By expanding and re-imagining Christian concepts like the Bible, Christ, and atonement, Frothingham transforms Christianity into the vehicle of a new dispensation. This new religion, the Religion of Humanity, is naturalist and materialist, yet it avoids being reductionist by stretching the notion of existence in a way that is deeply indebted to Feuerbach. Frothingham credits even

misrepresentations of God as pointing indirectly to something real in humanity and the world: "The Christ of Humanity is the *human element in all Mankind* [...]. He is the symbol of that essential human nature which is the Messiah cradled in the bosom of every man" (90, 109). Much like the religious humanism of the twentieth century, Frothingham's Religion of Humanity embraces naturalism but refuses to relinquish the language and even the organizing concepts of the Unitarian Christianity out of which it grows. He finds kernels of truth in all religions, though he sees those religions through the salient concepts of liberal Protestant Christianity rather than on their own terms. By imagining a universal religion accessible in its plurality, and by fixating especially on the incarnation and immanence of God in the world and in the human, Frothingham also presages by nearly a century elements of both the perennialism of Aldous Huxley (1945) and the death of God theology of Thomas J.J. Altizer (1966).

The Origins of Political Secularism in Free Religion and Liberalism

Francis Ellingwood Abbot, another of FRA's three founders, appropriated Holyoake's Secularism to create a distinctly American version that would contribute to later forms of organized humanism. His expressly political secularism would also help create the tensions the term still bears in the present day. Abbot was the founding editor of *The Index*, a journal that began in 1870 as the *de facto* mouthpiece of the FRA (Ahlstrom 1951). More politically and religiously radical than Frothingham, Abbot broke with the Unitarian Church following the adoption of its Christian platform and soon after resigned from his position as minister of the Unitarian Society in Dover, New Hampshire. Parishioners who still considered themselves Unitarian filed and won a lawsuit that ended Abbot's brief stint as minister of "Free Religion" for an Independent Society that met in the same Dover Meeting House. In 1869, Abbot was welcomed by a congregation in Ohio, which agreed to his demand to break from the American Unitarian Association and reconstitute itself as the First Independent Society of Toledo. In 1880, he would also leave the Free Religious Association, in part out of frustration with members whom

he viewed as overly Christian and insufficiently “liberal”—as in “free”—in their religion and politics (Ahlstrom 1951).

In the years following the Civil War, the noun “Liberal” allowed a meaning that has since fallen out of use. In the parlance of Abbot and his interlocutors, “Liberals” frequently referred to advocates of “Free Religion” and included a wide variety of Christians, Jews, Spiritualists, atheists, and other freethinkers (see also Hamburger: 294-296). By the mid-1870s, being Liberal could also imply support for Abbot’s “Demands of Liberalism,” a nine-item list he published in *The Index* on April 6, 1872, and which was later reprinted on the front page of every issue (Abbot 1872). Abbot composed the “Demands” in response to ongoing attempts by the National Reform Association to pass a Christian amendment to the Constitution (Ahlstrom 1951; Hamburger 2002). Nationwide support for the “Demands” inspired the founding of dozens of local “Liberal Leagues” throughout the country, and in 1876, Abbot and others formed a parent organization, the National Liberal League.

That same year, Abbot played an important role in the development of American secularism. Writing in the January 6, 1876 issue of *The Index*, in an article called “The Unfinished Window,” Abbot merged Holyoake’s “Secularism” with his idiosyncratic version of “Liberalism,” imbuing the former with another distinct, but related meaning (Abbot 1876: 6-7). In addition to “philosophical,” capital-S Secularism, Abbot advocated “political” secularism, which he understood to mean the separation of church and state (see also Putnam 1894: 506). Abbot’s conflation allowed him to discursively merge the trans-Atlantic “Secularist” movement with the “free religion” movement he had helped to found with the FRA and the “Liberal” movement he had inspired with the “Demands of Liberalism.” As historian Tisa Wenger observes (2010), this conflation contributes to an ongoing confusion over the definition of “secularism.” Recovering the term’s origin can help us understand how and why it came to acquire the meanings and significance it has today.

Free Religion and Ethical Culture

The Free Religious Association also played an important role in Felix Adler’s

founding of the first Society for Ethical Culture in New York City, a key antecedent of early twentieth-century religious humanism. Unlike Abbot's fleeting associations, Adler built a movement that would last. The New York Society remains an active community today, and since 1910 they have owned and occupied a large stone building located at the corner of 64th Street and Central Park West. Born in Alzey, Germany in 1851, Adler and the rest of his family moved to New York City when he was a child in order for his father, Samuel Adler, to become rabbi of Temple Emanu-El, the wealthiest congregation in the United States and one of its leading Reform synagogues (Olds 1996). After graduating from Columbia College in 1870, Adler returned to Germany where he received his doctorate in semitics at the University of Heidelberg. Expected to succeed his father at Temple Emanu-El, he gave the Sabbath sermon upon his return in 1873; he titled it "The Future of Judaism" (Radest 1969: 17). Adler's radical vision for secularizing Judaism went over poorly with his father's congregation, foreclosing the possibility of his becoming their rabbi. He did, however, make a good impression on a minority of its members. With their help, he secured a short-term appointment at newly founded Cornell University and soon became involved in the American freethought movement.

In 1878, when Ethical Culture was still nascent, Adler became the second President of the Free Religious Association, replacing an aging Frothingham. Imagining an ambitious future for the young organization, Adler pursued a platform that included a school for training free religious leaders and a plan for endowing university chairs (Radest 1969; Ahlstrom 1951). Like Abbot, he was also interested in social and political activism that would extend beyond the FRA's annual meetings. Wary of the institution-building necessary for concrete action, the FRA resisted Adler's new initiatives, and in 1882 he resigned from its presidency. Despite his frustration, the connections that Adler formed in New England had a strong influence on Ethical Culture, and in his role as President, he was able to attract a number of men who would become the leaders of his new movement (Friess 1981). His experience with the FRA inspired him to pursue his institutional vision with Ethical Culture: independent societies, supplied with trained leaders by a national organization, and with a focus more on social action than intellectual debate or

ritual communion.

In 1910, the New York Society for Ethical Culture decided to amend its original charter. The new document articulated explicit understandings of “religion” and “religious” while emphasizing morality and refusing to take a position on the supernatural:

Interpreting the word ‘religion’ to mean fervent devotion to the highest moral ends, our Society is distinctly a religious body. But toward religion as a confession of faith in things superhuman the attitude of the Society is neutral. Neither acceptance or [sic] rejection of any theological doctrine disqualifies for membership (quoted in Ericson 1988: 12).

Conscious of Ethical Culture’s proximity to the boundary of the religious, Adler approached it carefully. Ethical Leaders today often paraphrase a passage from a lecture he once gave: “The Ethical Movement is religious to those who are religiously-minded [sic] and to those who interpret its work religiously, and it is simply ethical to those who are not so minded ” (Adler 1946: 68). His “ethical religion”—Adler’s own phrase (67)—would undergo a number of significant changes over the next century and a half. Though he founded an international movement that would have an enormous impact on present-day humanism, throughout his life Adler strived to distinguish Ethical Culture from the organized humanism that emerged in the 1920s. He considered humanism far too naturalistic to be compatible with Ethical Culture’s Kantian metaphysics, and up through his death in 1933, he refused to align himself with the nascent humanist movement (Olds 1996).

Ethical Culture and the Rise of Humanism

The Ethical movement became international when Stanton Coit arrived in London in the late 1880s (Radest 1969; MacKillop 1986). Coit had trained in New York under Adler, who then arranged for him to pursue graduate work at the University of

Berlin. Upon returning, Coit founded the first settlement house in the United States—two years before Jane Addams' Hull House in Chicago. After a brief stint as minister of London's South Place Unitarian congregation, Coit began establishing the British Ethical movement, eventually founding the British Ethical Union (Budd 1977). Like Adler, Coit distanced himself from humanism and did not want others to refer to the Ethical movement as the humanist movement (MacKillop 1986). Despite Coit's reservations, it was out of Britain's Ethical Societies, and in close relationship with the secularist and rationalist movements, that freethinkers first began describing their efforts as "humanism" (Walter 1994). The term joined an already complex constellation of labels that had long included references to the Religion of Humanity, a phrase that was popular among followers of Comte (and as in Frothingham's case, with those seeking to correct him) (see Wright 1986).

One of the term's earliest adopters was Frederick J. Gould, an apprentice of Coit who played a prominent role in founding the British Ethical movement. He broke with Coit in 1899 and began using the term "humanism" around the same time (MacKillop 1986). Gould recognized that a wide array of labels had proliferated among his fellow freethinkers, but he did not treat them as mutually exclusive. In an article published in October of 1900 he wrote that "true Rationalism includes humanism" (quoted in Walter 1994: 69). In another article the following month he listed his affiliations: "I am a Freethinker, Atheist, Agnostic, Secularist, Positivist, Ethicist, Rationalist." Gould would go on to write an autobiography in 1923 entitled *The Life-Story of a Humanist*, and he preferred the term "humanism" above all others throughout the rest of his life.

By the time *The Humanist*, an English journal, published its first issue on January 1, 1917, references to "religious humanism" and "humanist religion" had been circulating for well over a decade. The journal announced its mission in its very first article, "The Religion of Humanism":

We seek to widen and deepen the whole concept of religion; to get it out from the stifling prison in which the Churches have, for long ages, confined it—out into the air, where it can breathe and flourish and grow magnificently. [...] It

is in order to stimulate the will of the people, and of the rulers, that this journal will devote itself to the promulgation of the religion of Humanism (Gorham and Smith 1917: 1-2).

The Humanist was a mouthpiece for the British Ethical Societies, but it was published by the Rationalist Press Association (RPA), an organization founded in 1899 by Charles Watts and George Jacob Holyoake (Budd 1977). Through Holyoake's role in the RPA, which Gould also helped to found, he had a hand in the creation of two of the most influential -isms in the history of institutionalized nonbelief: secularism and humanism.

Organized Humanism: A New Religious Movement

The organized humanism that developed in the United States in the nineteen-teens and twenties was spearheaded by a number of clergymen, former clergymen, and scholars. Three of those clergymen played a particularly important role in the formation of humanist institutions in the United States: John H. Dietrich, Curtis W. Reese, and Charles Francis Potter. Like the publishers of Holyoake's *English Secularism*, they sought to expand the category of religion such that it could contain practices and beliefs that were oriented only to the present, material world. They transformed the Unitarian Church to make room for their humanism, and in the case of Potter, expanded beyond its institutional boundaries. Decades later, their religious humanism gave rise to an avowedly secular humanism that distinguished itself from religion and affirmed the division between secular and religious that came to prevail in the second half of the twentieth century.

John H. Dietrich began using the term "humanism" around 1915, shortly before becoming minister of the First Unitarian Society of Minneapolis. He borrowed it from an article he read by Gould that appeared in the British Ethical Culture journal, *Ethical World* (Olds 1996). Though the term originated with Gould and his RPA and Ethical colleagues in Britain, Americans would be the first to formally institutionalize humanism. Dietrich set the wheels in motion by using the

term in his sermons and writing, and it was Dietrich who introduced it to Reese in 1917 when they met at the Western Unitarian Conference in Des Moines, Iowa. Though Reese had been using a phrase of his own creation, the “religion of Democracy,” he eventually accepted Dietrich’s appellation, and the two became some of the first to popularize religious humanism in the United States (Olds 1996).

By the height of his career, Dietrich had developed what he called a “Religion without God.” His theology was not atheistic, at least not according to his understanding of atheism: “I do not use the term, atheist. Atheism, I believe, is properly used as a denial of God; and my attitude towards the idea of God is not that of denial at all; it is that of inquiry” (Dietrich 1928a: 19). Dietrich minimized the importance of belief in God, arguing that it refers to many different understandings, and no circumscription could ever be adequate:

And after all, men and women, no one can affirm or deny the existence of God without defining the term; and they are wisest who attempt no definition of the undefinable. [...] So long as a man believes in the integrity of the universe and of himself, names and symbols are relatively unimportant. Titles can bear little relation to the infinite (Dietrich 1928b: 14).

He praises the atheist who “does not try to penetrate beyond the veil of natural phenomena” and strives for the betterment of humanity, and he criticizes the nihilistic and self-serving atheism that justifies itself by the axiom “might makes right” (1928b: 18). He personally saw no grounds for doing away with all uses of the term “God,” nor did he think belief in God is necessary for “religious worship” (Dietrich 1934: 1-2). Like his colleagues Reese and Potter, he saw in the structures and rituals of religion the means to exalt nature and humanity.

Charles Francis Potter was also ordained in the ministry of his youth, and he became a Baptist pastor despite his growing theological liberalism. Born in Marlboro, Massachusetts in 1885, Potter became a minister in 1908, the same year as Reese. He joined the Unitarian Church around the same time as Dietrich, in 1914, and it was from Dietrich that he first learned of humanism. After Potter began as

minister of a Unitarian congregation in Edmonton, Alberta, one of his parishioners observed that his theology of “Personalism” strongly resembled the “Humanism” he had heard a minister named Dietrich preach in Spokane, Washington. Though Potter was not known for his humanism as early as Dietrich and Reese, he reached wide renown as a humanist from 1930 on, and he played a significant role in creating a movement that could stand apart from Unitarianism (Olds 1996).

Potter established his national reputation in a series of debates with John Roach Straton, the theologically conservative pastor of New York City’s Calvary Baptist Church. In 1919, Potter had become minister of the city’s West Side Unitarian Church, and his congregation was thriving. In late 1923, he agreed to debate Straton on a range of issues, the first being the Bible as “the Infallible Word of God” (Olds 1996). Potter won the debate, along with the next two, and Straton won the fourth. Though Potter is hardly an exemplar of theological modernism, Straton published his side (and not Potter’s) in 1925 as *The Famous New York Fundamentalist-Modernist Debates*.

The heavily publicized events with Straton earned Potter a reputation as a formidable proponent of evolution, and he was asked to be an expert for the defense in the 1925 trial of John T. Scopes in Dayton, Tennessee. For the rest of his career, Potter would stand apart from humanist Unitarians like Dietrich and Reese, but also from the vocal opponents of conservative religion like Scopes defense attorney Clarence Darrow and trial reporter H.L. Mencken. By 1929, Potter was deemed too radical for his new congregation, New York City’s Universalist Church of the Divine Paternity. In September of that year he broke with Unitarianism and founded the First Humanist Society of New York. Though the new society never provided a sustainable income, it marked the first independent humanist institution, and the books and articles Potter wrote to earn his living remain touchstones in the movement’s early history (Olds 1996).

Curtis W. Reese was born in 1887 to a devout Baptist family in North Carolina. Like Dietrich and Potter, he set his sights on the ministry and eventually made a break with the church of his youth. In 1926, while working in Chicago as Secretary of the Western Unitarian Conference, Reese became a member of the

board of Meadville Theological Seminary and played an important role in its relocation from Meadville, Pennsylvania. Securing a large donation from a wealthy businessman, Reese outmatched competing offers from Ithaca and Cleveland and negotiated the seminary's affiliation with the Divinity School at the University of Chicago. He would later oversee the incorporation of Lombard College in 1933, resulting in the Meadville Lombard Theological School that exists today (Olds 1996).

Among contemporary humanists, Reese is best known for his role in editing the Humanist Manifesto in 1933, for helping to found the American Humanist Association (AHA) in 1941, and for serving as the organization's president for its first fourteen years. In 1936, Reese and University of Chicago professor Albert E. Haydon founded the Humanist Press Association in Chicago, serving as its first president and vice-president, respectively. In 1941, they oversaw the organization's transition to the American Humanist Association and the beginning of its publication of *The Humanist* (Olds 1996). Five years later, the AHA filed for a tax exemption as an educational organization, as opposed to a religious organization, marking another new institutional trajectory for humanism, separate from the Unitarian Church (Flynn 2002: 40).

Secularism Wanes and Waxes

Testimony from a United States Congressional hearing held in 1915 offers a glimpse into the transition from secularism to humanism among organized nonbelievers and underscores the trans-Atlantic movement of labels and ideas among nonbelievers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In his testimony, John D. Bradley, president of the Washington Secular League defined his worldview for a bemused Congressman: "Secularism is the religion of humanism, the religion of the renaissance; it represents the move of modern civilization; it is founded upon the experience of this life, the only experience that any of us knows anything about" (U.S. Congress 1915: 44). Bradley interweaves disparate intellectual threads in order to locate secularism and humanism within a shared, legitimate tradition. He equates Holyoake-style secularism with a religion called humanism, which he then

conflates with the humanism of the Renaissance. He locates this triad within the movement of modern civilization—a narrative of progress in which modernity brings a secular focus and a turn away from “supernatural religion”

While humanism ascended, the popularity of “Secularism” declined. In the 1920s, lacking strength as a movement and thus lacking defenders, secularism became the bugaboo of religious leaders in England and the United States. Members of the interwar Protestant ecumenical movement viewed secularism as the result of God’s eviction from the earth, and they adopted the defeat of “secular civilization” as a rallying cry (see the Jerusalem Report 1928). Writing in *The Crisis* in 1937, Baptist minister Benjamin E. Mays names secularism as the shared enemy that inspired the formation of the World Council of Churches:

Regardless of the theological differences of the churches assembled, they were all conscious of a common peril—secularism and materialism. In some countries of Europe it is the domination of the nation-state. In the United States and England it is the peril of a highly mechanized material civilization. The recognition of a common enemy helped create unity (Mays 1937: 316).

Only after WWII did secularism re-enter popular discourse as more than a bugaboo, and surprisingly, it meant the separation of church and state. Abbot’s usage in the nineteenth century only circulated among freethinkers and secularists, and its reappearance in the 1950s deserves more historical research. The early 1950s marked the start of the Cold War, a time when Presidents Truman and Eisenhower made a concerted effort to encourage religion as a way to combat the enemy of “godless communism” (see Aiello 2005 and Gunn 2009). The era also marked the beginning of a decades-long stretch that established most of America’s jurisprudence on the separation of church and state (see Sullivan 2014).

Though humanism’s history describes some of the people and institutions who carried the legacy of Holyoake’s Secularism into the twentieth century, the current state of research leaves many questions unanswered. How did “secularism” transition from the positive descriptor of a worldview and social movement to the

name for a bugaboo of both conservative and ecumenical Protestants? How did political secularism, a term used among a relatively small, fringe group of American activists become a mainstream term for the separation of church and state? And in turn, how did secularism become the name for a set of colonial and neocolonial projects that have remade religion the world over? This chapter accounts for only some of secularism's many traces.

Secularism and Humanism Interwoven

In 1961, the Supreme Court ruled in *Torcaso v. Watkins* that language in state constitutions that requires a religious test for office violates the First Amendment. The suit's most immediate effect was to allow Roy Torcaso to become a notary public in the state of Maryland, despite being a nontheist and despite that state's Constitution forbidding anyone from holding office who would not declare belief in the existence of God. In its *Torcaso* decision, the Court relied on a previous case, *Everson v. Board of Education*, which had extended the notion of separation of church and state from the federal level to the states (1947). Eight states still have language requiring all officeholders to believe in God, though where lawsuits have challenged that language, religious tests have been overturned. As is the case in Maryland, even when overturned, the original language is allowed to remain.

In a footnote in *Torcaso* the histories of secularism and humanism interweave: "Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others" (495 n.11). The term's appearance in this footnote was strange, because even though it existed in 1961, no one had used "secular humanism" in print as a positive appellation. For example, Catholic Bishop Fulton Sheen mentioned it in 1940; Reinhold Niebuhr used it in a lecture in 1952, and Adlai Stevenson in a lecture in 1954.¹ In all these cases, "secular humanism" is a disparaging term that contrasts with Christianity or "Christian humanism."

Humanist philosopher and theologian William R. Jones makes a similar observation in *Is God a White Racist?*, a critique of black theology and an early

attempt to use “secular humanism” as a positive term. He adopted it for his position, which he considers one step beyond a “humanocentric theism” because it relinquishes belief in God altogether (Jones 1973). In a footnote, he explains his choice of words: “Though I do not regard the term ‘secular’ to be an appropriate modifier, I employ it here because of its common usage. Secular humanism is often defined as the opposite of Christian humanism, and it is this essential difference I wish to emphasize” (227). As Jones makes clear, as of 1973, he does not consider himself to be part of a larger movement called “secular humanism,” and he understands his use of the term “secular” as reclaiming a bugaboo of Christianity and an explicitly Christian humanism.

Jones clarified this point even further in a new edition of *Is God a White Racist?* that was published in 1998. Again writing in a footnote, he asks the reader “to accept a fundamental semantic correction”: the “secular” he appended to his humanism was drawn from a musical genre, “slave seculars,” as opposed to the Christian spirituals that were “the musical embodiment of the black church’s theism” (Jones 1998: 215). Wishing to distinguish himself from the “secular humanism” of Paul Kurtz, discussed at greater length below, Jones had come to describe his position as “black religious humanism” or “black radical humanism” (see also Floyd-Thomas 2008). Though some humanists had begun referring to secular humanism in print by 1973 (Kurtz 1973), the term had yet to label a distinct movement that was legible to those outside the small world of secular activism and organized nonbelief.

Secular Humanism Reclaimed

In the wake of *Torcaso*, in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, minor lawsuits and proposed state legislation began arguing that “Secular Humanism” is an official or established religion in the United States (Toumey 1993). In 1978, John W. Whitehead and John Conlan synthesized these disparate attempts in an article published in the *Texas Tech Law Review* that built on *Torcaso* in order to make “the religion of Secular Humanism” a full-blown bugaboo for the nascent Religious Right.

According to Whitehead and Conlan, "The Supreme Court has adopted a concept of religion which is tantamount to Secular Humanism's position of the centrality of man, because the basis of both is the deification of man's reason" (1978: 12). They argued that secular humanism had superseded Protestantism as the *de facto* established religion in the United States, and it was time for America to return to its Christian roots. In the eyes of Whitehead and Conlan, as well as conservative evangelicals like Francis Schaeffer and Tim LaHaye, secular humanism had become the central ideology of the American state. But where were the actual people who called themselves secular humanists?

SUNY-Buffalo philosophy Professor Paul Kurtz founded the first organization representing avowedly *secular* humanists in 1980 when he established the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism. After spending more than a decade working for the American Humanist Association (AHA) as editor of its magazine, *The Humanist*, Kurtz parted ways with the group in 1978. One AHA leader I interviewed estimated that around half of its membership and many of its prominent donors left with Kurtz, providing him with the means to found a new organization. Kurtz realized that "secular humanism," in its various senses, was both beleaguered and infamous. By institutionalizing it, he could simultaneously justify his break with the AHA, draw away its avowedly "secular" members, and elicit donations from political liberals. According to another secular activist I interviewed who worked with Kurtz for decades, "Secular humanism was being widely criticized by people on the Religious Right, and nobody was speaking up for it."²

Not only did Kurtz position his organizations as a break from the religious tradition of the AHA, but he also set them up as an institutional and ideological bulwark against the Religious Right. If Kurtz could establish that his *secular* humanism was not a religion and his beliefs and groups were not religious, then he and his fellow secular humanists could thwart conservative Christian attempts to argue that secular humanism is an established religion in the United States. Kurtz's organizations benefited from lawsuits filed by religious conservatives because they brought publicity and donations to the Council for Secular Humanism, and they provided a clear opponent. His network of groups, collected under the umbrella of

the Center for Inquiry (CFI), is now the largest nonbeliever organization in the United States, and it continues to define itself against groups like Ethical Culture and the AHA, which welcome avowedly religious, non-theistic humanists. Given how and why they were founded, it becomes clear why Kurtz's groups objected to legal efforts by the AHA and others to define secular humanism as a religion. Credibility, money, and members are all at stake.

The divide between religious and secular humanists grew out of an older tradition of expressly religious humanism, which in turn sprang from nineteenth-century movements like Holyoake's Secularism, the freethought movement, Comte's Religion of Humanity, and the Unitarian Church. Generations of nuanced debate over terms and ideologies has bequeathed us much of the language we reach for when discussing secularism and what it means to be secular, regardless of whether we are non-experts, activists, or scholars. It is only from within a fraught inheritance that American lawyers and judges can adjudicate the thorny legal questions raised by lawsuits like those that ask whether secular humanism is a religion. Gaining a better understanding of the origins of our terms and the histories of the organizations that file and support such lawsuits is crucial for grasping the stakes of secularism's persistent conflicts.

Secularism Lately: The Challenge of Polysemy

As many of the chapters in this volume attest, "secularism" has come to mean far more than Holyoake ever intended, and even Abbot's distinction between philosophical and political secularism can hardly capture the variety of meanings the term conveys. Some of these versions of secularism are so disparate in scope and scale that they are practically concealed from one another, like a gem and its mine or a single tree and the forest in which it resides. Recent postcolonial critiques of secularism use the term to name an assemblage so large that it obscures the fringe nineteenth- and twentieth-century freethought groups that are the central focus of this chapter (see also Weir 2015). And yet those who critique this kind of secularism—or religio-secularism, as Yolande Jansen calls it in this volume—have

succeeded in describing a diffuse global project, concomitant with colonial and neocolonial domination, which has realigned indigenous modes of self-organization and self-understanding. We have come to see how this big secularism has remade the world in its own image, though in the process, the little secularism of atheists and activists has become obscure.

Like the gem in its mine and the tree in its forest, the two secularisms are not unrelated, nor are they merely symptom and etiology. Understanding how they connect to one another is key to recognizing that a polysemous secularism does not describe an arbitrary set of things that bear the name, but an inter-related complex that hangs together and has co-evolved, adopted by groups and causes, redefined by judges and scholars, and re-appropriated by everyday people who remain far outside academic debates (Blankholm 2014). Secularism, as we inherit it, is not arbitrary at all, and in its vicissitudes lies a story about the powers that have laid claim to it and the agendas they have pursued. This chapter has told only one brief version of that story with the aim of demonstrating its close relationship with humanism and secular humanism, and in turn, to observe its proximity to religion.

Recovering the tradition of “religious” secularism allows us to recognize its particularity and the ways in which it continues to vie competitively among other practices and ideologies. In Holyoake’s careful distinction between “Secularism” and “Secular instruction” we can recognize a parallel to contemporary concerns about the secular and its proper relationship with religion. Recent lawsuits asking whether secular humanism is a religion are manifestations of this tradition, and they call our attention to how secular is at once both biased and neutral—one position among many, but also a name for the position that decides among them or refuses to favor one over another. That this tensely loaded concept forms the basis in the United States of such crucial distinctions as the teaching of religion and the teaching about it should give us pause (*Abington v. Schempp* 1963). An acknowledgement of secularism’s complicated history and its persistent polysemy makes available a more honest approach to debates over secularism. It enables us to concern ourselves less with adjudicating what is secular and what is religious and focus instead on the more important question of how we came to care.

Notes

1. From unattributed articles that appeared in the *New York Times*. See references for specific citations.

2. These interviews were part of a larger ethnographic project that comprised my dissertation (Blankholm 2015). I anonymized my sources and thus refrain from naming them here.

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