

March 7, 2009

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# National Journal

# Rise of the Godless



Tired of being ignored in the political arena, nonbelievers are becoming more aggressive about pushing their legislative agenda.

■ By Paul Starobin

Look out, social conservatives. The secularist, humanist, freethinking nontheists and atheists are growing in number, and coalescing into a movement with a real agenda.

**And in God they do not trust.**

# Rise of The Godless

■ By Paul Starobin

“**T**hat chaps my ass,” Terry McDonald said between bites of a sliced-brisket lunch at the Hard Eight Pit BBQ on the outskirts of Dallas. McDonald, a retired insurance-industry executive who heads a Dallas-Fort Worth group known as the Metroplex Atheists, was expressing his displeasure at Barack Obama’s decision to take the presidential oath of office with his hand on a Bible once used by Abraham Lincoln. McDonald is convinced, as are some other atheists, that Lincoln was at most a lukewarm Christian—maybe not a true believer at all. And McDonald suspects, as do many other atheists, that Obama himself is not really a devout believer but is donning a religious cloak for political expediency.

No matter. McDonald is a committed activist, and like any trench warrior for a social and political cause whose progress will be measured in years, not days or months, he focuses on the positive. The Metroplex Atheists are not a rich bunch—annual membership dues are \$1—but the group still managed recently to raise some \$2,000 to put up a billboard alongside a Texas highway for a month. The catchphrase is “Don’t believe in God? You are not alone,” set against a backdrop of blue sky and white clouds. McDonald, an ex-Catholic who was born on a military base in Georgia, said that his e-mail box teems with confidential messages from folks eager to confess a ripening disbelief in God—yet are fearful of being ostracized by family, friends, and work colleagues if that unsettling truth were known.

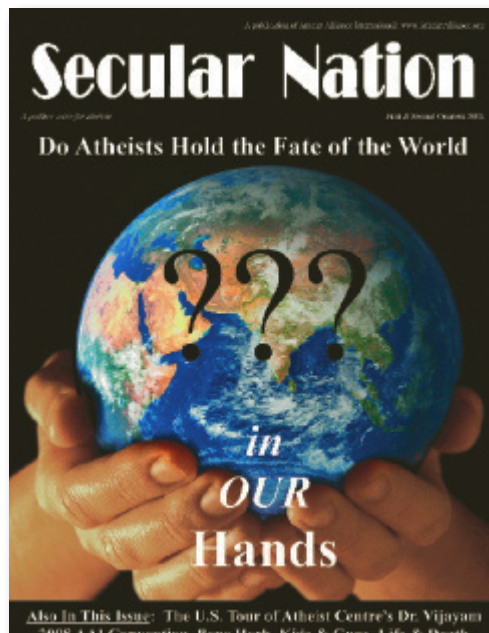
The Metroplex Atheists are joined by at least a dozen other groups plowing this ground in the Dallas region. Their ranks include students as well as doctors, lawyers, scientists, and other professionals. And their activism, deep in the heart of Texas, ties in to a burgeoning grassroots movement that is national and indeed global in scope. This is the march of the Godless, the cultural and political mobilization of those who variously identify themselves as atheists, nontheists, secularists, freethinkers, humanists, and other labels all intended to denote a lack of belief in a divine entity.

Although the precise number of the Godless, in Texas or anywhere else, is difficult to gauge, exit-polling data suggest that nonbelievers represent a growing segment of the U.S. electorate. (See chart, p. 26.) The bloc of voters identifying themselves as religiously unaffiliated—which does not directly translate into nonbelievers but includes their ranks—has risen in every presidential election since 1988: from 5.3 percent that year to 12 percent in 2008. That 12 percent share amounts to 15 million voters—a bigger bloc than the Hispanic vote (9 percent), the gay vote (4 percent), and the Jewish vote (2 percent), and just a notch smaller than the African-American vote (13 percent).

In the past, politicians in Washington and elsewhere could largely ignore the Godless, whatever their numbers. Nonbelievers lacked the consciousness of a political movement; to the extent they were organized at all, it was mostly as members of an intellectual club, reflecting on the meaning of a life without God (and the patent absurdity, as many of these folks think, of a life *with* God).

But those days are over. Now the Godless are making a crucial transformation toward the status of a my-time-has-come movement with a political and legislative agenda to enact—and with this shift, a host of contentious national issues is being engaged, with the potential to ignite a new round of culture wars in American society.

In taking their cause to the political arena, the Godless are cheered by the passage of the Dark Age, as they see it, of the George W. Bush era—a time conspicuous, in their minds, for its faith-based, willful abandonment of sound policy in science and other domains. “The climate is right in the country today



■ **DISBELIEF:** This atheist billboard (opposite) has been put up by groups around the country. The Atheist Alliance International publishes *Secular Nation*.

for a major expansion of humanist ideals and humanist thinking—atheism, free thought,” Louis J. Appignani, an aging Florida tycoon who is the Godless movement’s No. 1 sugar daddy, said in a rare interview. “I think we are on the threshold of a counter-revolution from the Bush years.”

Appignani has earmarked \$30 million for various Godless causes from a fortune made in a computer education company, an international chain of modeling schools, and real estate development. Born in New York City in 1933 into a family of Italian Catholic immigrants, he came to his Godless views after

reading the British philosopher Bertrand Russell, author of such works as *Why I Am Not a Christian*.

But what exactly do the Godless want? How would America be different if their clout grew to reflect their numbers? These are questions the national political establishment can no longer dismiss in the perhaps reassuring but nevertheless wrongheaded belief that all Americans subscribe to the coin slogan “In God We Trust.”

As the Godless would have it, the answer is that the nation would be governed more by cool reason than by irrational faith. The end result would be a more peaceful and modern society, less willing to embark on violent conflicts of a religious character in far-off places like Iraq and more willing to fund medical science in promising areas like stem-cell research. Euthanasia would be generally permitted, under the signature idea that each person is his or her best decision maker; a pharmacist could not legally refuse, as a matter of religious faith, to fill a birth control prescription; schools could not teach the various forms of creationism, including intelligent design, under the banner of science; the Boy Scouts would lose all forms of federal support for teaching that a good Scout has a “duty to God.” (The Girl Scouts no longer insist on that particular duty.)

And in a sign of the culture warfare to come, the Godless are emerging as an enthusiastic voice on behalf of scientific efforts to clone human beings, a technology with the potential to “conquer mortality,” as Appignani put it. “There’s nothing immoral about it,” he added, notwithstanding the Vatican’s firm declaration that human cloning amounts to a sacrilegious bid by humankind to play God. The Godless see themselves as pro-science; they tend to think that mindless religious scruples prevent the development of such techniques as cloning that could extend the boundaries of human life.

That is the vision and the heart of the long-term Godless agenda, tantamount to a bid to wrest control of the culture from the religious-minded. At the moment, though, the movement is engaged in a struggle—reminiscent, activists suggest, of the demands made by those who have fought to banish discrimination against African-Americans and gays—for recognition and respect. To start with, the Godless want a place at the table. They

want their voices to be heard not only at the White House and in the halls of Congress but also across the Potomac at the Pentagon, which they view as an especially hard bedrock of conservative religious culture, viscerally hostile to nonbelievers. In short, the Godless want to be viewed no longer as an offbeat and safely marginalized counterculture but as part of the diverse mainstream of American life.

And in this immediate and non-negotiable aim, they vow, they will not be denied.

### The Coalition

In January, shortly before Obama's inauguration, the national leadership of the Secular Coalition for America—an umbrella lobbying group for leading atheist, humanist, and related groups—gathered at the Holiday Inn Capitol in Washington to talk strategy for the post-Bush era. A *National Journal* reporter was allowed to sit in on a portion of the session and ask a few questions, and afterward stayed around to chat with the leaders during a luncheon break.

The Godless don't readily come to agreement on anything, as is probably unavoidable in a movement composed of self-styled freethinkers. The mere formation of the Secular Coalition for America, founded in 2002 as a one-person operation, represented major progress for this crowd. Fundraising, while still modest, has grown from roughly \$48,000 in 2005 to \$340,000 in 2008.

Seated around a horseshoe table were leaders of the American Humanist Association ("being good without a god since 1941"); the Atheist Alliance International ("a positive voice for atheism!"); the Internet Infidels ("a drop of reason in a pool of confusion"); and the Secular Student Alliance ("Mobilizing Students for a New Enlightenment"). Others at the table included the Freedom From Religion Foundation, headed by Dan Barker, a former Christian evangelical preacher now known for his musical CD *Friendly Neighborhood Atheist*; and the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, headed by Jason Torpy, a retired Army captain who served in Iraq.

The president of the Secular Coalition for America is Herb Silverman, a mathematics professor at the College of Charleston who successfully challenged in court a provision of the South Carolina Constitution that barred atheists from holding public office. Although Silverman conducted the meeting, it was the chair of the advisory board, the politically well-connected Woody Kaplan, who registered as the weightiest presence in the room.

The Boston-based Kaplan is a former shopping mall developer who describes himself as "a full-time political and civil-liberties activist" for rights groups, including not only the Secular Coalition but also the American Civil Liberties Union. His connections are a prime reason that coalition leaders have obtained meetings with half the members of the U.S. Senate, including such Democratic bigwigs as Majority Leader Harry Reid of Nevada, Richard Durbin of Illinois, and Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, plus Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania on the Republican side of the aisle.

Secular Coalition leaders feel confident, from private soundings, that at least 20 members of Congress are nonbelievers. Only one, however—Pete Stark, the veteran House Democrat representing a safe liberal district in the San Francisco Bay area—is willing to identify as such. In 2007, Stark came out as a "Unitarian who does not believe in a supreme being."

As a practical political reality, the Secular Coalition knows that it must reach out to sympathetic voices in the religious-belief community—that is, voices with an appreciation for the civil-rights' dimension of the Godless cause. At the end of 2007, under the leadership of Director Lori Lipman Brown, a former Nevada state senator, the Secular Coalition became a member of the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights. The conference is a Washington-based group, founded in 1950, whose 200-plus members include the African Methodist Episcopal Church, B'nai B'rith International, and the National Council of Catholic Women.

Still, the political fundraising efforts of the Godless tread on delicate ground, as seen last fall in an episode from Democrat Kay Hagan's successful bid to unseat Republican Sen. Elizabeth Dole in North Carolina. Hagan attended a campaign fundraiser at the Boston home of Kaplan and his wife, Wendy Kaminer, who also sits on the Secular Coalition's advisory board. Dole then came out with a television ad saying that Hagan "took Godless money" and asking, "What did Kay Hagan promise in return?" Hagan heatedly called the ad an attack on her "Christian faith." Although she went on to defeat Dole, the incident was a low moment for Godless activists, given Hagan's hasty flight to the safety of her faith and her reluctance to defend the Godless constituency as being as much a part of American politics as any other group.

For the Age of Obama, part of the strategy is reminding the president of his roots. The American Humanist Association bought an ad in the January 20 special inauguration section of *The Washington Post* congratulating Obama and calling him "living proof that family values without religion build character." The ad featured a snippet from Obama's best-seller, *The Audacity of Hope*: "I was not raised in a religious household.... Without the help of religious texts or outside authorities, [my mother] worked mightily to instill in me the

### ■ New Political Force

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values that many Americans learn in Sunday school: honesty, empathy, discipline, delayed gratification, and hard work.”

Also in the book, in a passage not quoted in the ad, Obama refers to his mother’s “professed secularism,” writing that “for my mother, organized religion too often dressed up closed-mindedness in the garb of piety, cruelty and oppression in the cloak of righteousness.” Obama has also said, as he did on February 5 at the National Prayer Breakfast, that his Muslim-born father “became an atheist.”

Leaders of the Humanist Association felt gratified when the Obama transition team named Jonathan D. Moreno, a prominent bioethicist, as a reviewer of policies of the President’s Council on Bioethics. Moreno has written for the association’s magazine, *The Humanist*, and he is generally regarded in non-theist circles as one of their own. “He is our key guy,” said Appignani, the Florida mogul, who is the leading bankroller of the American Humanist Association as well as the funding source, through his foundation, for the Appignani Humanist Center for Bioethics at the United Nations, a think tank devoted to issues such as end-of-life care.

What’s more, the remodeled White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships will not only be about the community work of faith-based groups, Obama said at the February 5 prayer breakfast; it will also reserve a place for “a secular group advising families facing foreclosure.”

Yes, Obama has professed faith in Jesus Christ, which he arrived at as an adult, and has made high-profile efforts to reach out to the religious vote, as symbolized by his inviting Rick Warren to deliver the invocation at the inauguration. Activists have no real proof that Obama, whatever his mother’s beliefs, is not a sincere Christian, but they are accustomed to seeing hypocrisy on the part of elected officials on the God issue. They reckon that things will change only when their movement gets bigger and is perceived as more consequential. “What we need to do is organize better,” Silverman said. “Then the politicians will follow.”

### How Many Are There?

Does the secular movement really have the numbers to sustain a long-term program of political activism? An often-cited barometer of its growing prominence is the best-selling performance of books making the case for disbelief, by authors including Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great*), and Daniel C. Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*).

Although this is an interesting commercial trend, it does not necessarily signify a mass appetite for such literature: It could be that the same devoted flock is buying one of these books after another; some of the buyers, no doubt, are simply curious believers who remain steadfast in their faith once they set the book down. Nor does the commercial success of Bill Maher’s 2008 documentary, *Religulous*, a comic takedown of religious belief as absurd, necessarily point to a broad-based followership for atheism. The film has grossed more than \$13 million in the U.S. on a production budget of \$2.5 million.

More impressive is the story told by hard polling data. Other surveys back up the exit-poll numbers showing that the religiously unaffiliated bloc grew from about 5 percent of the elec-

torate in 1988 to 12 percent in 2008. The share of Americans who report no religious preference hovered around the 5-to-6 percent level from the early 1970s through the 1980s, jumped to 9 percent in 1993, rose to 14 percent in 1998, and is now about 16 percent, according to Roger Finke, a professor at Pennsylvania State University who is director of the Association of Religion Data Archives. By that count, the no-preference bloc is nearly equal to the share of mainline Protestant churches, from which it is probably poaching members.

Is that trend apt to continue? “The one thing that is clear is that people feel more comfortable than before saying they do not have a religious affiliation,” Finke said. “There clearly is a movement away from traditional churches,” he added. That shift, moreover, is most pronounced among young adults. One-quarter of adults in the 18-to-29 age group claim no religious affiliation, compared with 8 percent of people 65 and older.

It’s possible that young people will find God as they grow older and ever nearer to the Grim Reaper. But an encouraging sign for the Godless is the growing number of young people involved as movement activists. The Secular Student Alliance now has 129 affiliated chapters, up from 42 in 2003. The group has a network of 14,300 people on its e-mail and related lists. Leaders have found that it is actually easier to start a chapter at a school in the Bible Belt than in more-liberal precincts of America. They call this the “Brown phenomenon” because nontheists at liberal campuses such as Brown University in Providence, R.I., tend to see no need for a chapter: They are already a mainstream part of their student community.

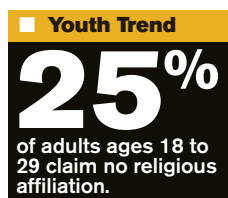
The Godless movement, as might be expected, draws on a base of donors that is weighted toward the liberal parts of America. California, with 12.1 percent of the nation’s population, accounts for 18.7 percent of the Secular Coalition’s donors; Georgia, with 3.2 percent of the population, accounts for only 1.5 percent of all donors. Still, in Arizona and Virginia, neither of which is a bastion of liberalism, the Secular Coalition’s donors are overrepresented relative to each state’s share of the national population.

That said, there is no question that the religiously unaffiliated, the Godless included, are a pronounced Democratic bloc. In 2008, 75 percent voted for Obama, compared with 78 percent of Jews and 54 percent of Catholics, according to the exit polls. In interviews, activists in the secular movement are as apt to say they are libertarians as to say they are liberals; in terms of party affiliation, however, there appears to be a consensus that the Republican Party has formed an alliance with the Christian Right that is all but unbreakable. By no means do the Godless activists fully trust the Democratic Party, yet they see no other practical alternative for accomplishing their political objectives. So their strategy, logically enough, is to become a weightier presence inside the party.

### The Atheist as Other

A few miles from George W. Bush’s new home in the posh Preston Hollow neighborhood of Dallas, a group of freethinkers are enjoying Sunday brunch at St. Martin’s Wine Bistro. Amid the party’s generally good cheer, buoyed by the mimosas a waiter pours from a pitcher, a young woman tells a heartrending story to her mates.

Her regular practice has been to enjoy Friday dinner at her father’s home, also attended by one of her dad’s close friends. Although she has never been vocal about expressing her beliefs



about God, her freethinking bent, it seemed, had become well-known to the Friday group. On a recent occasion, her father's friend, a few drinks in his blood, directly accosted her, accusing her of being a "liberal atheist"—that was the double-barreled combination—and asking why she could not just be like everyone else. She said the encounter made her feel ill, as if she had been physically thrashed.

Heads at the table nodded as the woman told her tale. Notwithstanding a next-day apology from her sobered-up accuser, her days at the family's Friday dinner table are now over, she said.

This is not the tale of a lynching, such as African-Americans can recall, or of a bruising assault by the police, such as gays remember from the notorious raid on the Stonewall bar in New York City in 1969. Still, the pain is keenly felt, and survey data suggest that the Godless indeed enjoy the unhappy status of a group against whom persecution is socially tolerated. In a 2006 article in *American Sociological Review*, a trio of researchers at the University of Minnesota offered a wealth of statistical data on behalf of the proposition that atheists have come to represent a signature "other" in American society—even compared with groups usually accustomed to feeling shunned.

Consider this tidbit, from a 2003 survey. Offered the statement, "I would disapprove if my child wanted to marry a member of this group," 48 percent checked the box for atheist, compared with 34 percent for Muslim, 27 percent for African-American, 19 percent for Asian-American, 19 percent for Hispanic, and 12 percent for Jew. If there is some need for a society, any society, to designate an outcast, the atheists appear to be the "it" group.

Today's generation of atheists has watched one marginalized group after another, from the blacks to the gays, move toward the center of American political life. Their unwillingness to remain as a kind of last acceptable "other" is perhaps the main reason for their gathering transformation from club to political movement.

Becky Robinson stopped believing in God in her late teens. She did not become an activist in the movement until her early 20s, when she left Pittsburgh, where she had grown up, to attend school in the Dallas area. She found, to her dismay, that the religious climate "permeates everything" there—starting with being asked what church she attended whenever she met someone for the first time. "I am not one to hide how I think," she said in a recent conversation. "Here I felt I had to be an atheist with a capital A."

By going online, Robinson found like-minded nonbelievers in the Dallas area. In 2006, she organized a University of Texas (Arlington) chapter of the Secular Student Alliance, and several dozen students showed up at the first meeting. At the second meeting, a student in the nursing program complained that her microbiology professor was offering extra credit for Bible study. The group "put an end to that right away" by letting the head of the biology department know what was going on. That was "a defining moment," Robinson said. "We knew we had to be there."

Now Robinson is active in rallying her nontheist comrades to oust "creationists" from their elected posts on the Texas Board of Education. "We have a long battle ahead of us," she added, referring to Texas's "fellow heretics" and their struggle to be viewed as "normal, average, good people."

### Apple Pie, Atheists, and Foxholes

In its current incarnation as a civil-rights movement, the march of the Godless is apple pie stuff—what could be more American, after all, than a broad-based effort for change by mobilizing like-minded citizens at the ballot box and bringing the pressure of their numbers to bear on their representatives in Congress?

Of course, it is not that simple, as blacks and gays found in their respective claims for dignity and justice in all walks of America. In the case of the Godless, the bid to end discrimination and achieve equal opportunity in the military—a top priority for the Secular Coalition in 2009—offers an illustration of the complexities.

On the surface, the Godless might not appear to face a problem. The military doesn't ban atheists from serving, just as it doesn't ban homosexuals (fudged by the "don't ask, don't tell" policy). But as a practical matter, the Godless say, they are often made to feel unwelcome in an environment that, despite the Constitution's insistence on a separation between church and state, favors the religiously fervent.

On November 10, the Secular Coalition sent a letter on this issue to President-elect Obama, noting that although enlistees take an oath pledging no more than "to support and defend the Constitution," the military's own investigations have identified occasions when "military leaders have worked in conjunction with the military chaplaincy in coercing soldiers to attend religious services and encouraging them to abide by religious laws or proselytize to their fellow soldiers."

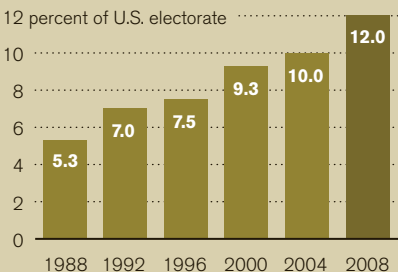
Coalition leaders and other critics say that the military is especially prone to favoritism of evangelical Christianity. The letter to Obama noted that "by far the largest single provider of chaplains to the military is now the Southern Baptist Convention, with 416 chaplains, one for every 40 service members who list their denomination as Southern Baptist."

Jason Torpy, the 32-year-old head of the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, a Secular Coalition group member, said that the military's efforts to promote evangelical Christianity typically start in basic training. He cited an example from his experience at Fort Leonard Wood in Missouri in the mid-1990s. For a rare "fun day" break from training, he and his mates got to go bowling in Lebanon, a town more than 30 miles from the base, but then they were taken to a local church for a "fire-and-brimstone" service by a Christian preacher.

"It is basically free marketing for that particular church and Christianity," Torpy said. Several years ago, in his new role as an activist, he took

### ■ How the Godless Are Growing

Although exit-polling data do not offer a precise measurement of the numbers of the Godless, their ranks are included in a rapidly growing bloc of voters who claim no religious affiliation.



SOURCE: National Election Day Exit Polls

his concerns to Senate Armed Services Chairman Carl Levin, D-Mich., who duly followed up with questions to Pentagon brass about such practices.

The Secular Coalition now aims to use its contacts in Congress to pressure the White House and Pentagon to institute comprehensive reforms. Its “action plan,” conveyed to Obama in the November 10 letter, calls for a directive from the Defense secretary requiring the services to update their regulations to explicitly prohibit all forms of proselytizing, to put an end to public prayer in mandatory-attendance settings, and to expand chaplain school training programs to ensure that chaplains are prepared to care for nontheists.

Torpy would like to see the U.S. military follow the example of the Netherlands in having “humanist chaplains” with a specifically nontheist approach. The cliché that there are “no atheists in foxholes” is “ridiculous,” he said, citing a 2004 survey by the Population Reference Bureau, which found that 21 percent of service members identified as atheists or as having “no religion” at all. In his own experience in combat theaters, he said, soldiers often said things like “why are we praying all this time?” A willingness to die for one’s country, Torpy added, is not a matter of belief in a higher power: “Just because someone put a cross on their graves, don’t mean that they were Christians.”

### Tom Paine’s Disciples

Like any other political and social movement, the Godless cause is prone to faction and disarray. In fact, because of the stress that growth can bring, it is easy to imagine that the secular movement, as now constituted, could fracture and dissipate its energies.

The Secular Coalition is showing growing pangs. In mid-January, its director, Lori Lipman Brown, abruptly departed after more than three years on the job. Silverman, the president, said that by this point it “has gone beyond what we even thought it would be” and that “the managing wasn’t going as efficiently as we wanted.”

Brown, for her part, said, “The job morphed out of what I really enjoy doing”: working on policy issues, for one thing. Asked to name the secular movement’s central challenge at this point, she said, “There are people who want to focus more on explaining their conclusion about whether there is a deity than making the country feel comfortable and safe for people like themselves.”

That comment touches on an unresolved tension at the grassroots level, between the movement’s Malcolm X-type militants, eager to engage in pitched battle with the religious-minded on the other side of the barricade, and Martin Luther King-type integrationists, bent on engagement with the religious community in a bid to win hearts and minds.

Zach Moore, a leader of the North Texas Church of Freethought, said that his ideal is to be inside a packed Christian church, debating a pastor on the merits of belief versus nontheism. “I am concerned with the average pew-sitter,” he said. But he acknowledged that some of his fellow activists regarded this

approach as futile. Moore, who has a day job as a medical writer, is busy organizing the third annual Texas Freethought Convention, slated for the Dallas area in 2010.

What’s really needed, said Marilyn Westfall, an activist based in Lubbock, Texas, is a Godless version of the Ronald Reagan rule—so that no atheist should speak ill of another, just as Reagan decreed that no Republican should criticize another.

The movement could also profit from deeper reflection on its posture toward the world of believers. The Godless are often spat upon, but they are not always good neighbors themselves. Some activists are imbued with a sense of arrogance—the arrogance of the true believer, one is tempted to say—evident in their disdain for the religious as captives to superstitions that only a cretin could accept. Their polished debating points seldom reflect the awkward truth—awkward, that is, to their mind-set—that religion is not the only source of war and strife, that the worldview of a murderous atheist like Stalin can also be a wellspring of blood and tears.

Such arrogance seems especially misplaced if one considers that many secularists get it wrong about their hero Charles Darwin, whose 200th birthday they celebrated on February 12 (which also happened to be Lincoln’s 200th birthday). Darwin’s main point was not that *Homo sapiens* was a creature of cool reason but the last in a line of animal descent, and as such, a creature, in no small part, of instinct.

Their sense of embattlement should abate as their still-young movement matures and gains the confidence that only major victories can bring. Although modern secularism is a global cause, with a stronger foothold in Europe than in America at the moment, the U.S.-based activists would do well to emphasize the American-ness of their quest.

The fact is, there has always been a strain of American patriot with a pronounced hostility toward traditional religion. “The most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries, that have afflicted the human race, have had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion.” Who said that? The answer is not Hitchens or Harris, Dennett or Dawkins—it is none other than Thomas Paine, in his 1794 tract, *The Age of Reason*. That would be the same Tom Paine who years earlier inspired fellow colonists in America to revolt against the British Crown with his better-known pamphlet, *Common Sense*.

In the meantime, the Godless can savor small triumphs, like the one that passed almost unnoticed, although not by them, on Inauguration Day. The protean Obama, after using Lincoln’s Bible for taking the oath of office, concluded his Inaugural Address by declaring that America’s “patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers. We are shaped by every language and culture, drawn from every end of this Earth.” Did he have his mother, perhaps, in mind? Score one for the Godless. ■

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