

Humanism in America Today

Summary: Writers and public figures with large audiences have contributed to the increasing popularity of atheism and Humanism in the United States. Thousands of people attended the 2012 Reason Rally, demonstrating the rise of atheism as a political movement, yet many atheists and Humanists experience marginalization within American culture and the challenge of translating a mostly intellectual doctrine into a social movement.

On a rainy day in March of 2012, roughly 20,000 people from all parts of the Humanist, atheist, and freethinking movements converged on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. They gathered to celebrate secular values, dispel stereotypes about secular people, and support secular equality. Sponsored by twenty of the country's major secular organizations, the Reason Rally featured live music and remarks from academics, bloggers, student activists, media personalities, comedians, and two members of Congress, including Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), the first openly atheistic member of Congress.

The Reason Rally is evidence of a growing energy and excitement among atheists in America. This new visibility of secularism was inspired in part by the “New Atheists”—including authors such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens—who have pushed the discussion of the potentially dangerous aspects of religion to the forefront of the public discussion. More people than ever are turning away from traditional religious faith, with the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life reporting that, as of 2014, some 20% of the US population identify as “unaffiliated.” This is particularly true of the rising millennial generation, which has increasingly come to view institutional and traditional religion as associated with conservative social views such as opposition to gay marriage, and is therefore much more skeptical of the role of religion in public life than their parents and grandparents. The proportion of unaffiliated millennials is just over one in three.

This new energy and excitement can be found, too, in online communities which increasingly drive Humanist thought and activism. The much-frequented *Freethought Blogs* and the *Friendly Atheist* are but two examples of these vibrant communities. *Atheist Nexus*, an atheist social network with 27,000 members, and the increasing memberships of national Humanist organizations like the American Humanist Association also speak to this trend.

Nonetheless, Humanists face challenges. Atheists are still a mistrusted minority in the United States. Some fear that revealing their Humanism to coworkers or family might lead to ostracism, and high profile cases of atheist children being driven out of their homes and high schools for standing up for their beliefs gives credence to those concerns.

Humanists also face the challenge of transitioning from a mainly intellectual doctrine and philosophy to a true social movement. In the past, Humanism has tended to be highly academic, living in journals and books but rarely in communities, although attempts to build local Humanist communities have had some success in the past. The Ethical Culture Movement, founded by Felix Adler in the late 19th century, is one prominent example. However, this success has infrequently been sustained for long. Now, organizations like the Humanist Community Project at Harvard and the Center for Inquiry are pushing to create local Humanist communities where people can come together to explore, deepen and act on their Humanist values. The success of these efforts remains to be seen.

Internationally, too, Humanism is on the rise. In the UK Humanist Celebrants are now performing more weddings than ever before, and the All Party Humanist Group in the UK Parliament has over 100 members of all major political parties (up from 47 in 1996). Humanist groups exist all across Europe, in India, and increasingly in Africa, connected to each other through networks like the Global Secular Humanist Movement Facebook page, which had more than 330,000 fans in 2020. The task now is to ensure that the values discussed online are enacted offline, with increasing engagement of Humanists in the political and civic spheres.

Humanists today look to the future with hope. They live in a time when they are freer than ever before to question received wisdom and assert their independence from gods, and when technological progress and the value of science is evident. They are called now to engage with society to ensure their values are embraced ever more fervently by an increasing number of people.