

## New Directions for Humanism

***Summary:** Younger generations are creating new movements and trends within American Humanism. Among their efforts are legal challenges to religion in public spaces; networks of Humanist student groups at universities, colleges, and high schools; and large, secular gatherings, including Reason Rallies in 2012 and 2016, that have captured national attention.*

In recent years, inspired by renewed interest in atheism and freethought, the Humanist movement has begun to expand its focus. Secular student groups are starting on college and university campuses across the country, with the Secular Student Alliance registering new affiliates each month and even starting highly successful outreach to high schools. The strength and vibrancy of these groups demonstrates that a new generation of secular-minded youth is growing up in a culture friendlier than ever to religious skepticism, and many are hungry for nonreligious alternatives to religious ethical traditions.

Even teenagers in high school are standing up for Humanist values like secularism. They are speaking out about prayers at their graduation ceremonies and challenging religious statements on the walls of their public schools, taking their grievances to court if necessary. In 2011 Jessica Ahlquist, a Rhode Island teenager, challenged the presence of a prayer banner that had been hanging in the auditorium of her public high school since 1963. A federal judge agreed with Ahlquist's objection to the banner and ruled its placement at Cranston High School West unconstitutional. The support of the American Civil Liberties Union was not enough to prevent Ahlquist from experiencing discrimination because of her convictions. One state representative even called her "an evil little thing," a moniker Ahlquist later used in the title of her blog. In 2012 Ahlquist was awarded the Humanist Pioneer Award from the American Humanist Association.

Other Humanists are beginning to focus more on local community organizations for the post-student population, asking whether, in a culture increasingly departing from traditional or institutional religion, spaces are needed for people to gather and discuss their values, which might be nonreligious. Groups in Boston, Arizona and on the West Coast are building fully-fledged Humanist community centers which replicate some of the functions of traditional religious communities, while others are expanding the focus of their community to include service work and political activism.

Humanist groups are increasingly making their presence felt in the civic sphere, with billboard campaigns promoting their values and lobbying their political representatives. The Reason Rally, a March 2012 gathering of around 20,000 Humanists, atheists, agnostics and others on the National Mall in Washington, D.C., announced the new political and civic clout of the Humanist community in an unmistakable way. There was a second Reason Rally held in June 2016.

While working to grow their own communities, Humanists are also reaching out to others. Although interfaith work is controversial in the Humanist movement, with some suggesting that Humanists should maintain their distance from religious communities, others have sought to build bridges on a foundation of shared values. No one personifies this trend more than Chris Stedman, author of the book *Faitheist: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* (2012). Stedman's work brings together Humanists and the religious for service projects and interfaith discussion has begun to inspire greater collaboration across the whole movement. This increased engagement has not gone unnoticed; in 2013, Humanist leaders from the Secular Student Alliance and other Humanist organizations were invited to the White House to discuss how Humanists might involve themselves more fully in public service. This question comes at a propitious time, because Humanists have found a new enthusiasm for service. Organizations like the Foundation Beyond Belief and Non-Believers Giving Aid are harnessing the collective power of the nonreligious to do good work in the world. Each of these organizations raises money for causes consistent with Humanist values like supporting disaster relief efforts, educational programs, and volunteering. The increasing participation of Humanists in such organizations is evidence that many are setting out to prove that indeed you can be "good without God."