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INTRODUCTION

The Religion of Secularism

In 1892, Henry Shipley, a self-proclaimed liberal in Van Buren, Arkansas, wrote a letter to the editor of the Manhattan-based *Truth Seeker*, the leading journal of its day for freethinkers and secularists. His first order of business was to salute the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC, as a crucial ally, as “a model of just what we need: library, museum, reading-room, with a free platform.” But that was not the only institutional paradigm he had in mind for the advancement of liberal secularist principles. “There is another thing that I have thought of much and regretted, and that is to me the fastidiousness of many of our friends in regard to the use of the words ‘religion’ and ‘church.’ What we want above all things is the religion of humanity and a church of humanity.” Among Shipley’s reasons for embracing religious nomenclature was that it would help nonbelievers claim their “civil rights” in a country where the Protestant majority routinely linked good citizenship to church-going. Surely, having a congregational home would offer freethinkers some relief from the “unnecessary odium” accorded atheists and infidels. But even more, liberal secularism needed the affective solidarity that came with religion as an “organized body”: “The essential idea of religion is devotion. We want good and true men and women devoted to humanity.” Shipley

clinched his argument with a motto attributed to the revolutionary hero Thomas Paine—one that was so recognizable in these circles that it amounted to a scriptural verity from the founding father of American freethought: “The world is my country, to do good my religion.” If “the immortal Paine” so obviously embraced the notion of religion in this cosmopolitan and deistic formula, then surely his faithful heirs should as well. Stop the “quibbling about the etymology of words,” Shipley entreated, and get on with building Paine’s temple of reason, a new church of humanity, a new religion for forward-looking liberals and secularists.¹

Five years later, in 1897, Channing Severance, a sharp-elbowed carpenter in Los Angeles who hammered Christianity every chance he got, wrote a piece for the *Truth Seeker* that made apparent why Shipley’s church-affirming approach was not going to stop the quibbling. “As religion is a system of worship based on a belief in some kind of a God,” Severance explained, “all talk about the religion of humanity is a misuse of the word; and when I see a Freethinker trying to define his ‘religion,’ the inclination rises to call him down; for a man with a head afflicted with ‘plenary’ baldness would not be more ridiculous talking about his hair.” A thoroughgoing atheist, Severance could not abide any religion at all, however rationalistically, humanistically, philanthropically, or naturalistically it was rendered. He also turned to Paine to underline how serious he was about the totality of this purge, offering “an up-to-date change” of Paine’s ubiquitous saying: “The world is my country; to do good my desire; but I have no religion, and see no use for any.” Between Christianity and atheism, between religion and irreligion, there was no gray area, no defensible middle ground. The distinction between the religious and the secular could not be fudged; it required unbroken monitoring to preserve reason’s translucence

from piety's pollution. Those mealy-mouthed folks like Shipley who wanted to pursue the practical interconnections between religious and secular liberalism looked nonsensical, even abominable, to purists like Severance. Every last shackle upon the human mind needed to be broken; every religion—"without exception"—needed to be expunged.²

Shipley and Severance were but two local American voices in a multifaceted debate that had arisen repeatedly across Europe and North America since the Enlightenment and still resonates in the contemporary religious landscape. For those who disengaged themselves from Christianity and Judaism, for those who could no longer identify with the scriptural traditions they had inherited, what was left of religion? Were they to be defined by the wholesale negation of religious belief and practice, by the rejection of religious affiliation and obligation, by unremitting antagonism toward the Bible and the clergy? Were they to settle instead into a shoulder-shrugging indifference and have no care for something called religion at all? Or were the disenthralled to build a new religion on the ruins of the old? Were they to throw themselves into reconstructing religious community—with new material forms, ritual practices, hallowed texts, and associative opportunities—after they left church and synagogue? More basically, what did the word *religion* even mean once it became an object of reflection distinct from specific traditions and cultures? Was it necessarily connected to reverence for a Supreme Being, as Severance assumed, or could it be nontheistic? Was it grounded instead in the sociality of collective devotion, as Shipley suggested, a functional consecration of group solidarity? Was there a universal essence to religion—ontological, psychological, or anthropological—that would stabilize its definition? By the late nineteenth century, there were no straightforward, agreed-upon answers to any of these

questions, only multifarious responses. The learned abstraction of religion as a category for analysis and comparison had not fixed its significance but instead multiplied its indeterminacy. That definitional manipulability made it possible for secularists, by turns, to claim the term for themselves or to deny entirely its pertinence and applicability.

This book takes historical stock of what religion looked like for those who shared Shipley's hope of finding a space between Christianity and no religion, between being a Christian communicant and an unchurched freethinker. Those searching for a religion within secularism were intent on creating mediating terms and designations—on defining religion in such a way as to deemphasize the supernatural and to accentuate moral responsibility, intellectual freedom, cosmopolitan universality, and this-worldly progress. Hence they floated any number of alternatives for identifying themselves: they might be agnostic moralists, free religionists, ethical culturists, religious positivists, moral philanthropists, or simply nontheists; they might espouse the religion of humanity, the religion of this world, the religion of Thomas Paine, the religion of deeds, the religion of life, or the religion of the future. *Secularism* was itself a coinage of the mid-nineteenth century originally designed to break down the prevailing dichotomies between Christianity and infidelity, revealed religion and freethinking unbelief. Its chief initial expositor, the British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake, minimized the importance of metaphysical or theological differences and concentrated instead on shared affirmative commitments, a "simple creed of deed and duty." Secularism, Holyoake liked to say, was "the only religion that gives heaven no trouble"; its energies were entirely focused on "immediate service to humanity—a religiousness to which the idea of God is not essential, nor the denial of the idea necessary." By

Holyoake's lights, secularism did not stand in stark opposition to Christianity; instead, it was a broker of common moral ground; it offered an irenic space that would bridge the antagonistic divide between believers and nonbelievers. To emphasize the religiousness of secularism was a pragmatic effort on Holyoake's part to bind theists and nontheists together through an enlightened, universalistic humanitarianism.³

The declaration that "secularism is a religion"—as Robert Ingersoll claimed in 1887, following one of Holyoake's confluences—left a lot to be elucidated. For all his stature among freethinkers and agnostics, Ingersoll was not particularly adept at sharpening such an assertion. "Secularism is the religion of humanity; it embraces the affairs of this world," he elaborated, stressing a this-worldly focus as a secularist first principle. But how much did it help clarify matters to equate the religion of secularism with the religion of humanity? As the freethinker Moncure D. Conway remarked in 1880, "The phrase Religion of Humanity has been much and vaguely used; and best phrases so used are liable to degenerate into cant." Conway recognized that the expression had a distinct lineage through the French philosopher Auguste Comte who, by 1855, had developed an ornate sacramental system to consecrate positivist science as the evolutionary fruition of all previous religions, the universal religion of the supremely enlightened. But Conway rightly indicated that the religion of humanity had largely broken free of that specific pedigree in the parlance of post-Christian liberals and freethinking secularists. "It would include the idea of human progress," Conway suggested, "also the sentiment of charity, of sympathy with mankind, and a spirit of benevolent reform." It had as its telos "the promise of a perfectly developed Humanity implying a perfect world"—one freed of violence, superstition, poverty, pain, injustice, and disease. On this side of human

perfectibility, however, the religion of humanity—or, in another of Holyoake’s formulations, the “religion of daily life”—had more mundane, utterly familiar projects of self-improvement, self-culture, and self-control: hard work, cleanliness, sincerity, cheerfulness, thrift, familial constancy, sobriety, and a cultivated taste for the arts. Even in the hands of its most illustrious proponents, the religion of humanity was often little more than pleasant bromides, refined in tone and short on detail. “Adorn your life with the gems called good deeds; illumine your path with the sunlight called friendship and love,” so went one of Ingersoll’s embellishments of the new religion’s imperatives.⁴

The religion of secularism was frequently left vague and unspecified for good reason. Beyond its claim to be the religion of this world, it also made intellectual independence and the displacement of all religious authorities foundational to its platform. As Thomas Paine had famously announced in *The Age of Reason*, “I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.” Every secularist, Ingersoll explained, constituted “his own church, his own priest, his own clergyman and his own pope. He decides for himself; in other words, he is a free man.” With so much emphasis placed on individual autonomy and the overthrow of all forms of ecclesiastical tyranny, whatever garb the new religion assumed would almost certainly be worn lightly. Any effort to build a church of humanity would have to overcome this bedrock suspicion that churches as institutions were at cross-purposes with the mental liberty that liberal secularists presupposed. When the freethinker G. L. Henderson suggested building a “Liberal Church,” as a local branch of the “Religion of Humanity,”

in New York City in the 1870s, he immediately had to answer that skepticism. Since “the existing churches” were all “despotic and unprogressive,” would “it not be better to avoid the formation of churches altogether?” It was always a lot clearer what secularism forbade its devotees—“no mysteries, no mummeries, no priests, no ceremonies, no falsehoods, no miracles,” to cite one of Ingersoll’s lists—than what it allowed. Liberal, humanistic forms of religion were seemingly designed to be nebulous and disaggregated, at odds with organizational elaboration and ritualized embodiment.⁵

It was not even clear, as Channing Severance’s complaint suggested, that freethinking secularists wanted to allow themselves the space to have something called a religion at all. The contortions were frequent and readily apparent. “Liberalism is not a system of religion,” the ex-Methodist preacher J. D. Shaw explained from Waco, Texas, where he had built an independent congregation of freethinkers after the Civil War. “It is a creedless, unecclesiastical, non-political, anti-theological system of ethical culture.” In many ways, to be an advocate of the religion of humanity demanded ambivalence about being an advocate of the religion of humanity. “If you choose to call it a religion of any kind,” Shaw continued, “I would say it is the religion of humanity, and not of God—of this world, and not of another.” The conditional *if* was critical, an apology for the awkwardness of the embrace that followed. “If we must have a religion,” another freethinker opined, “let us discard the religion of Christ and try the Religion of Humanity.” Those who wanted to build a new religion for those who had left religion confronted a challenge internal to their own freethinking liberalism: the very notion that “religion” was a desideratum—that it was a valued feature of social life, that it was worth salvaging in one enlightened form or another—had been rendered highly

problematic. “That which shall take the place of religion and serve to inspire our conduct shall not even be called religion,” one freethought lecturer maintained in the early 1880s, “for this word has become so thoroughly identified with the worship of God that it can never be made to express the emotions that are in perfect harmony with reason and nature.” (That this renunciation appeared in a lecture called “What Is Religion?” in a volume entitled *The Infidel Pulpit* suggested the persistent engagement with religion even in its denial.) Were committed secularists only supposed to negate, neutralize, and regulate religion, or were they permitted to express it? And, if there was room for the latter, what varieties of religion would freethinking liberals allow themselves?⁶

What is religion? That was a thorny definitional question that by the late nineteenth century had been deprived of any catechetical simplicity: “What is religion? Thinking about God and doing his will.—What do you think you ought to do? Pray to him, praise him, keep his word,” so went a typically pious answer in 1839. Instead the question was a philological and comparative puzzle, made especially intricate through the emergent scientific study of religion. Francis Ellingwood Abbot, a primary architect of nineteenth-century secularist demands for strict church-state separation, knew how much “modern scholarship” had complicated his task of claiming “religion” for freethinking liberals. In *A Study of Religion: The Name and the Thing* (1873), Abbot reflected on the derivation of the word *religion* from the Latin word *religare*, signifying “to bind back” or “to bind fast.” If that etymology proved correct, then religion suggested “the idea of bondage,” which would be very much at odds with the “free religion” he advocated and which would suggest that he needed “to abandon the word religion altogether”—just as he had already abandoned the word *Christian* to identify himself.

Abbot insisted, though, that the best scholarly authorities derived religion from *relegere*, meaning to go over or read through a text again. If that “root-meaning” were true, then religion could be understood as “*the application of the intellectual faculties under direction of conscience.*” To reach that tendentious conclusion, Abbot performed a lot of laborious research, and he knew he was likely to bore “a popular audience” with the gleanings from his notebooks. Still, if he were going to rescue the word *religion* for liberal secularists, he felt he had little choice but to begin at the beginning—with historical philology. After two or three years of such investigations, Abbot was happy to conclude that the word “most certainly belongs to us,” those freethinking mutineers who had left Christianity behind and embraced a cosmopolitan intellectualism. Moreover, he concluded that a definition limiting religion to a belief in God or gods was utterly provincial: the possibility of nontheistic religions had to be acknowledged. Studies of Buddhism made this point, Abbot suggested, but so did Comte’s religious version of positivism. “Atheistic religions” should not be excluded from “the family of recognized religions.”⁷

It took a lot of work for Abbot to satisfy himself that religion as a construct was salvageable as a live possibility for humanistic liberals, agnostics, and even atheists, but he hardly tired of such labors. His philological efforts were emblematic of a vast number of nineteenth-century projects to engage religion on secularist terms despite the recurrent challenges of doing so. This book explores such experiments through three case studies. Each dives beneath the altruistic and cosmopolitan generalities surrounding the religion of humanity (and parallel formulations) into more localized and materialized forms of actual practice. The first chapter focuses on the devotion to Thomas Paine, whose sanctified memory was central to the development

of a ceremonial life for freethinkers—one that centered on his birthday (January 29) and on his violated grave in New Rochelle, New York. The fact that Paine’s remains had been snatched from his tomb a decade after his death gave rise to a relic-seeking quest that lasted the better part of a century. Through examining the quite tangible piety surrounding the “Secular Saint Thomas”—as one versifier dubbed him in a poem commemorating his birthday in 1901—a more densely particular version of the religion of humanity comes into view. It was a visible fellowship that cared as much about enshrining a saint and honoring a prophet as it did about globalizing enlightened rationality or privatizing religious belief. While unmistakably opposed to the Christian materiality of relics, to the sacramental aura of “sacred things,” Paine’s American devotees nonetheless gave perceptible expression to the seriousness of their discipleship through the pursuit of their saint’s lost bones. Secularism had a body—or, rather, a missing body that was repeatedly mythologized in its absence as a token of Paine’s universal spirit. Paine was the rock upon which the American church of humanity was built.⁸

Next, the book examines the life-cycle rituals, particularly the funeral practices, which humanistic freethinkers developed to counter the liturgical conventions of the churches. In his capstone work, *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (1896), George Jacob Holyoake considered it axiomatic that nontheists needed to invent their own “secularist ceremonies.” Ritual, after all, was a universal ethnological phenomenon from which the enlightened were hardly exempt: “Certain ceremonies are common to all human society, and should be consistent with the opinions of those in whose name the ceremonies take place.” Looking askance especially at the marriage and burial services that the church offered, Holyoake suggested that secularists had to find

a way to replace them with more appropriate rites. It was an experimental project that many freethinkers and agnostics pursued, including the British secularist Austin Holyoake (George's brother) and the American positivist Courtlandt Palmer. Two groups, in particular, serve to demonstrate these humanistic efforts at ritualization. First, a small band of religious positivists, active on both sides of the Atlantic, built on Auguste Comte's elaborate calendar of saints and festivals in hopes of creating a new sacramental order for the enlightened. These positivist endeavors failed to win a multitude of converts, but the failure itself could be spectacular, as was the case with such passionate ritualists as David Goodman Croly and Malcolm Quin. Second, another pocket-sized assemblage, the Society of Moralists, based in Hannibal, Missouri, proved adept at inventing liturgies for secularists. The group's leader, a physician named A. R. Ayres, produced his own manual, *A Secular Funeral and Marriage Hand-Book* (1886)—a guide that ended up providing ceremonial refuge from the clergy for freethinkers across the country. The ability to conduct memorial services without clerical supervision became a badge of secularist triumph in death; secular funerals offered performative proof that freethinkers had died as they had lived, emancipated from Christianity. At a dirt-and-dust level, the advancement of secularism was measured not through the political success of liberal demands for total church-state separation but through the local availability of properly performed funerals and burials.⁹

Thereafter the book examines the churches that humanistic liberals and secularists built. When organizing themselves, American freethinkers often mimicked Protestant churches and Sunday schools. Katie Kehm Smith's First Secular Church in Portland, Oregon, in the 1890s was exemplary in that regard, but so were the churches organized by post-Christian Unitarians

around the principle of “free religion.” Octavius Brooks Frothingham’s Independent Liberal Church in New York City was a prime example of that impulse, as was the People’s Church in Kalamazoo, Michigan, led by Caroline Bartlett—a congregation that both Robert Ingersoll and George Holyoake enthusiastically endorsed in 1896 as an embodiment of their own secular religion. Flowing in the same currents of “free religion” were the Ethical Societies, organized by Felix Adler and his disciples, first in New York City, and then in Philadelphia, Chicago, and St. Louis. While Frothingham and Adler carried lingering affections for the traditions they had left, others reveled in the oppositional distinctiveness of the freethinking communities they were trying to build. M. M. Mangasarian’s Independent Religious Society (Rationalist) in Chicago and John Emerson Roberts’s Church of This World in Kansas City were two exemplars of that more sharply contrastive approach. Still, both were ex-Protestant ministers with a refined, gentlemanly air; both assembled their new congregations in fashionable urban theaters. For grassroots combat with Christianity, the schoolteacher Katie Kehm Smith was battletested on the ground in her promotion of secular churches in Oregon; so was W. H. Kerr, a farmer in Great Bend, Kansas, who founded the unambiguously atheistic Church of Humanity in 1903.

Such experiments with institutionalizing churches for secularists continued apace through the middle decades of the twentieth century, especially under the ascendant rubric of religious humanism. It was a pair of tax-exemption cases in the 1950s—one surrounding a Fellowship of Humanity in Oakland, California, and the other involving an Ethical Society in Washington, DC—that initially allowed such nontheistic groups to be counted (in American jurisprudence) as having religious standing in their own right. A subsequent Maryland case

involving an atheist named Roy Torcaso, who was denied certification as a notary public for being unwilling to avow God's existence as the state required, became a critical moment in ratifying the equal rights of nonbelievers. Handing down its decision in 1961, the Supreme Court vindicated Torcaso's right to hold an office of public trust irrespective of his nontheistic beliefs. Inadvertently, by way of a footnote, the unanimous opinion also provided a stimulus for the notion that "secular humanism" was in itself a distinct religion; if so, Christian conservatives argued, then that religion also had to be monitored for its own violations of the Establishment Clause. Even as the threat of secular humanism kept getting bigger as a phantasmal menace in the evangelical imagination, organized groups of religious humanists remained small, hardly living up to their culture-war billing as the puppet masters of American moral decay. Their fellowships were islets of humanistic community in a sea of evangelical megachurches, television ministries, and lobbying groups; they constituted a fringe more than a powerhouse. These legal, political, and cultural developments are addressed in the closing section of this book.

Having humanistic groups count as a "religion" or a "church" in legal terms wound up being a mixed blessing. The downside became quite evident in the wake of two Supreme Court cases, *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) and *Abington v. Schempp* (1963), in which the Protestant-derived religious exercises of prayer and Bible reading in the public schools were found to violate the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. No longer could any state legislature or local school board require students to pray or read the Bible in America's public-school classrooms. The uproar over both decisions was sustained and intense. For many American Christians, the Supreme Court was not defending a neutral religious environment in the schools but instead creating one

that was overtly hostile to pious expression and practice. They found fuel for their fight in the lone dissenter in *Abington v. Schempp*, Justice Potter Stewart, who argued that in barring school-sanctioned prayer and Bible reading his fellow justices had failed at “the realization of state neutrality” and had instead effectively endorsed “the establishment of a religion of secularism.” Stewart’s colleague, Justice Tom Clark, directly rebutted that claim in his majority opinion. In no way was “a ‘religion of secularism’” gaining preferential treatment; the court had no intention of favoring nonbelievers over believers; the schools were free to have pupils study the Bible “for its literary and historic qualities”; what they could not do is mandate particular religious exercises and devotional practices. Clark’s rejoinder failed to soothe the court’s critics; Stewart’s dissent proved all too resonant going forward.¹⁰

Stewart’s dissenting opinion gave a new judicial authority and a sharpened critical edge to the construct “a religion of secularism.” After 1963 it became an increasingly recognizable idiom among religious conservatives, ready for deployment in a long series of debates about religion’s place in American public life. Ronald Reagan would decry the “religion of secularism” in his efforts to restore prayer to the public schools in the 1980s, and Mitt Romney would dwell on its dangers in his attempt to generate solidarity, as a Mormon, with evangelicals. “In recent years, the notion of the separation of church and state has been taken by some well beyond its original meaning. They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God,” Romney explained on the campaign trail in 2007. “It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America—the religion of secularism. They are wrong.” Amid the long-simmering heat of the culture wars, few have had in mind Ingersoll or Holyoake, Paine or Comte when invoking the religion of

secularism, but instead Potter Stewart and the fire of conservative Christian critique that his dissent helped stoke.¹¹

The demons of secularism, secular humanism, and the religion of secularism—all became interchangeable fiends for arguing that evangelical Protestants were being unfairly disadvantaged in American social and political life, both within and well beyond the public schools. From this conservative Christian vantage point, liberal secularism had set itself up as a neutral arbiter but was actually operating as an established orthodoxy that excluded other forms of religious expression from the public square. As a critique, this evangelical reading of secularism's regulatory force lines up with an array of critical theorists who have indicted secularism's discursive authority in which the requirements of liberal statecraft set the terms for what counts as acceptable religion: the private and interior, the immaterial and disembodied, the tolerant and nonsectarian. Secularists may have led with notions of religious liberty, equal rights, and freedom of conscience, but that rhetoric recurrently masked more proscriptive policies and objectives. The "Dream of Emancipated Religion," as one nineteenth-century apologist dubbed his secularist faith, was always as much a negative as a positive vision—liberation for "enlightened" forms of religion combined with protection from "unenlightened" varieties. Secularism's advocates often had expansive disciplinary ambitions: they hoped at least to tame, if not eventually supplant, all types of religion that they considered inimical to liberal democracy, scientific rationality, and didactic supervision—from "primitive fetishism" to camp-meeting Methodism to priest-ridden Catholicism. The secularist aspiration for an emancipated, enlightened, and ethical religion was scarcely neutral or disinterested. It was always an adjudication of what religion should become and what it should cease to be.¹²

For the political stakes of secularism's regulatory aims, one need look no farther than Ingersoll himself, whose expositions were often especially revealing because they were especially unobtrusive:

Secularism is a religion that is to be used everywhere and at all times—that is to be taught everywhere and practiced at all times. It is not a religion that is so dangerous that it must be kept out of the schools; it is not a religion that is so dangerous that it must be kept out of politics. It belongs in the schools; it belongs at the polls. It is the business of Secularism to teach every child; to teach every voter. . . . Orthodox religion is a firebrand; it must be kept out of the schools; it must be kept out of politics.

Religion that subscribed to liberal secularist principles was safe; it was good for the nation; it was good for democratic citizenship; it was good for the world as a whole; hence the freedoms it enjoyed were clear and expansive. By contrast, both Protestantism and Roman Catholicism, in Ingersoll's view, posed disruptive sectarian dangers that needed to be cordoned off, as much as possible, from the public sphere. Secularism was, transparently enough, presented as the gauge of benign and permissible religion—the instrument used to manage religious differences rather than safeguard them. All too clearly Ingersoll's exhortation displayed the kind of underlying logic that contemporary evangelicals have highlighted in order to expose secularist professions of neutrality. All too clearly as well, his reasoning evinced the sort of disciplinary regime that critical theorists of secularist discourse have repeatedly unmasked, though here in Ingersoll's paean it wore no mask at all.¹³

Ingersoll was hardly alone in his offhanded exposure of secularism's ruling suppositions. Along with his philological efforts

to rescue *religion* as a useable word for freethinkers, Francis Ellingwood Abbot codified a nine-point platform for strict church-state separation, labeled the “Demands of Liberalism,” that he began to agitate for in 1872. Government-funded chaplaincies, Bible devotions in the public schools, and Sabbath laws—all the state-sanctioned preferences accorded Protestant Christianity—needed to be eliminated. Abbot thereafter took the lead in organizing the National Liberal League in 1876 to pursue those secularist demands and to counter evangelical activists who had proposed amending the Constitution to make the United States an officially Christian nation. A former Unitarian minister turned proponent of “scientific theism,” Abbot made plain how integral his vision of an emancipated religion was to his secularist projects: “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*,” Abbot explained with his own italicized emphasis in his founding report on the National Liberal League. American Christians failed to live up to the ideals of this “purely natural and secular religion” because they were party to a particularistic, exclusive religion—one that was all too prone to using the apparatus of the state to extend its authority and influence. Abbot’s “free religion,” his “secular religion,” was emancipated from particularity; it had “no special religious beliefs and practices”; its principles were pure and universal; it was the “common religion” of the republic—indeed, of all humanity. Political secularism was, for Abbot, the impartial guarantor of religious freedom and equal rights, but it nonetheless clearly had a preferred religion—a “free religion” that would protect

Americans from the evangelical “treason” of Christianizing the Constitution. This open endorsement of a post-Christian liberal religion as the nation’s baseline faith raised serious doubts about the capacity of Abbot’s secularism to be a vessel of even-handed neutrality.¹⁴

Ingersoll’s oratorical bluster and Abbot’s liberal organizing indicate that secularism’s critics make indispensably important points about its governing ambitions and discursive contradictions, but those trenchant appraisals also need to be set alongside the reverse dimension of secularism’s politics. As was evident in Shipley’s argument, postulating that secularists themselves had a religion was not a bid for majoritarian power—at least, not a realistic one—but instead a way of claiming civil rights for a widely ostracized minority. That liberal secularism, especially in the nineteenth-century United States, was going to act as a hegemon was largely a fantasy of its most excited enthusiasts and its most zealous adversaries. Holyoake himself spent six months in a British jail for blasphemy in 1842—no wonder that he was interested in finding a way to include avowed secularists under religion’s protective umbrella. One of Holyoake’s American counterparts, D. M. Bennett, the editor of the *Truth Seeker*, was sentenced to thirteen months in a New York penitentiary in 1879 for his blasphemous and obscene infidelity—no wonder that he wanted to see religious freedom expanded to include irreligious freedom. When equal rights and liberties were accorded atheists and freethinkers, it was often done with profound reluctance—as if the social, moral, and political order could not bear the open presence of such misfits and shirkers. As one Protestant writer in Boston aphorized in 1837 (the year before the ex-Universalist minister Abner Kneeland was sent to jail in the same city as a pestilent infidel), “A nation of Atheists is a nation of fiends.” Secularists, including Ingersoll and Abbot, had good reason for

wanting to whittle away at Christianity's own governing exclusions and suppressive dispositions.¹⁵

The demand for minority rights, for the full inclusion of non-believers in civil society, was front and center for the British freethinker John Sholto Douglas when he gave the address *The Religion of Secularism* in 1881. It was absolutely crucial, Douglas argued, that the British Secular Union “be acknowledged and recognized as a *religious body*. We who have, in obedience to the dictates of our reason, repudiated the orthodox faith, have constantly to hear brought against us that we are an irreligious body, having no religion at all.” In point of fact, Douglas averred, “the real meaning and definition of the word ‘religion’” had to do with that which “binds or unites mankind into one homogeneous whole”; it was of sociological, not supernatural significance. And, by that definition, “we Secularists . . . do justly claim to possess a great and ennobling Religion.” Liberated from “any dogmas respecting a personal Deity,” freethinkers cultivated instead “our common Religion of Humanity,” again crystallized in Paine’s one-line motto: “The world is my country, and to do good is my religion.” In Douglas’s view, once secularists were seen as having a religion of their own, there would no longer be any reason to withhold civil recognition from them alongside other dissenting minorities—Quakers, Jews, and Roman Catholics. Douglas had lost his own seat in Parliament as a result of his heterodoxy and was still waiting to see if his duly elected colleague, the atheist Charles Bradlaugh, would ever be recognized as an MP (it would take another five years). For Douglas, concretizing “the religion of secularism” was a critical step forward in claiming full enfranchisement and equal rights for a much maligned religious minority.¹⁶

By the second half of the twentieth century, religious conservatives were eager to confer religious status upon secularism, to

claim that the religion of secular humanism—thanks to a wayward Supreme Court—had become the nation’s established religion, dominating the public schools and controlling American public life. In the nineteenth century, as Douglas suggested, orthodox Protestants were hardly interested in dignifying the religion of humanity as a religion, no matter what its apologists claimed. The *Northern Christian Advocate*, a Methodist newspaper, scoffed in 1888 at the notion that an agnostic like Ingersoll or a positivist like Comte could have an actual religion: a religion of humanity, a religion of deeds, a religion of hope and help—all such infidel constructions were disingenuous dodges; they were gross misuses of religious language; they were empty shells of unreality. “This religion is no religion,” the paper concluded with complete assurance. Better to “deny that man has any need of religion” at all than to pretend that subscribing to Ingersoll’s creed or reiterating Paine’s motto counted as a religious profession. Likewise, in 1889, when a Congregational minister saw the idea of a secular religion being bandied about by some religious liberals, he dismissed it with a summary definition: “‘Secular Religion’—no religion at all!” The essence of religion, he insisted, depended on belief in the living God and in the hereafter; commitment to a this-worldly ethic of “social regeneration” was not enough to qualify. That default Protestant perspective—that an individual’s relationship to God was the sine qua non of religion—long excluded humanistic forms of religion from the kind of legal standing and social recognition that proponents asserted was rightly theirs. The twists and turns in that debate over defining religion, the switchbacks of evangelicals and secularists alike on the question of whether humanistic beliefs and practices counted as religion or not, have been important markers on the American religious and political terrain across two centuries.¹⁷

The three case studies that follow—of relics, rites, and churches—shift attention back to the nineteenth-century roots of the religion of secularism as a tiny and often disregarded sect. Bringing the local, fractional, and particularistic dimensions of this religion into view provides an alternative vantage to the culture-war representation of it that has come to prevail over the last half century and more. The religion of secularism was a splinter—or, rather, a series of them. Consigned to the nonbelieving margins of a covenanted nation, the devotees of its various strands struggled to gain equal footing in American civic life. Whatever their dreams for secular statecraft and rational enlightenment, they were hardly in a position to keep their Christian adversaries out of the public square or to put their demystified imprint on the culture as a whole. The rubrics of the religion of secularism—its devotion to Thomas Paine, its calendar of rites and ceremonies, its fellowship meetings—were ultimately more parochial in expression than insidious in reach. The religion of humanity, the religion of this world, the religion of ethical culture—such nineteenth-century constructs signified an assortment of undersized fellowships, affective rituals, and visible memorials that supporters cultivated against the odds of Christian dominance. They pointed to embattled local associations trying to create space for humanistic communities, for secularist lives and deaths, apart from the cultural authority and political power of a Protestant majority. To be sure, the religion of secularism had wildly imperial pretenses—it would be the universal religion of the future—but time and again, it had to settle instead for being the sanctuary of a sectarian minority. When Francis Ellingwood Abbot sent a gift copy of his founding report on the National Liberal League to the library at the University of California in 1880, the Berkeley cataloguer performed a suitably deflating gesture. Inside the front cover,

the librarian assigned this congress of Paine-venerating liberals to the category of “non-Christian sects.” The cosmopolitan sweep of Abbot’s “secular religion”—his “common religion” of all humanity—was pigeonholed as a sectarian project of a freethinking clique. It was the kind of reality check that proponents of the religion of secularism got accustomed to facing as a minority within a nation under God.¹⁸

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