



On secularism as a part of RSSIs

Convergence uses “secular” here as a broad category that includes many non-religious and non-spiritual ways of being. The secular viewpoint involves those people who feel that there is either no such thing as a spiritual reality, or god(s), or who just don’t feel certain whether these things exist. It also includes those people who deeply follow a creed that influences their worldview and self-definition, such as humanism, as well as shapes their daily conduct and practice. This creed connects them to a larger system of people who follow the same belief and ultimately provides a space to question existence, purpose, and interaction with the world.

Within the secular viewpoint, atheism is the absence of a belief in any supernatural reality, whereas agnosticism is the absence of any knowledge of the supernatural. These terms describe one component of a secular worldview, although they say more about what a person does not believe than what they do believe. Humanism is reliance on the human mind as the source of discernment and on science as the process through which the mind acquires understanding. Humanism focuses on enriching lives in the here and now, for every person. While secularism has sometimes been a reaction against the perceived abuses of religious dogmatism and authority, it is also a fully formed way of being in the world that does not exist only in opposition to religious and spiritual ways. Scholars and practitioners studying and working with secular individuals should address the broad spectrum of secular beliefs and understandings, beyond those which simply reject religion and spirituality.

When supporting the need of secular individuals on campus, it is important to address the following concerns:

1. Secular individuals have existential needs that necessitate support and community;
2. These needs can be met within Religious Life Offices, but appropriate programming and resources should be made available; and
3. Full inclusion of RSSIs requires a critical analysis of college culture that often mislabels Christian ceremonial practice as secular institutional tradition.

On the needs of secular individuals on campus

Approximately 30% of students in 4-year colleges define themselves as atheist, agnostic, or “none” (A profile of freshmen at 4-year colleges, Fall 2017, 2019). It is important to note that “none” is not exclusively a label for secular/non-religious students, but can also include those individuals who do not identify with a labeled RSS identity. Religious Life Offices should accommodate the needs of secular faculty, staff, and students. Secular individuals face the same critical existential experiences and problems that religious and spiritual individuals face. These secular individuals deal with grief, loss, stress, existential anxiety, questions of mortality,



and evil. They are in need of support in navigating through these difficult human experiences. Secular individuals seek spaces of meaning making and community building that focus on deeply existential topics, just as religious and spiritual individuals do.

On including secular students in religious life

Religious Life Offices should recognize and support secular students, including providing space for secular rituals. Rituals are important for strengthening social connection and unity within secular groups that may or may not have an established dogma (Secular Student Alliance, 2019). Religious Life Offices should provide the appropriate space for secular ceremonies and ritual actions. For example, it is inappropriate to assign a secular event to a university chapel. Secular ritual should be respected as a legitimate, engaging, and contemplative experience that requires an affirming secular event space on campus. Finally, administrators should consider more welcoming titles for Religious Life Offices, such as calling them Religious, Secular, and Spiritual Life Offices.

On supporting secular students

Full inclusion of religious, secular, and spiritual identities (RSSIs) requires critical analysis of and removal of Christian ritual practices at institutional events including, but not limited to, convocation, matriculation, and sports events. Praying and other forms of religious and spiritual expression should only occur at specifically identified voluntary religious or spiritual events that are not representative of the entire institution.

Full inclusion of RSSIs also requires secular staff in Religious Life Offices who are trained experts in supporting the emotional and existential needs of secular students.

The rise of secular viewpoints on college campuses requires higher education institutions to recognize, support, and include secular individuals into Religious Life Offices. Institutions must provide secular individuals with appropriate resources to support existential needs and social connection. Full equity and inclusion of secular individuals requires college campuses to analyze the ways in which they perpetuate systems of Christian hegemony within college culture and programming.

References

A profile of freshmen at 4-year colleges, Fall 2017. (2019).

<https://www.chronicle.com/article/A-Profile-of-Freshmen-at/246690>

Secular Student Alliance. (2019). *Building communities of belonging.*

<https://secularstudents.org/belonging/>

