GODLESS CITIZENS *IN A* GODLY REPUBLIC

ATHEISTS IN AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE

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PROLOGUE

To the ears of many Americans, the word "atheist" has a hard, unpleasant ring to it. Describing oneself with that label has never been a recommended way to court popularity. For that reason, many nontheists prefer to describe their beliefs with a different term. They call themselves agnostics, or freethinkers, or humanists, or secularists, or simply nonbelievers. Statisticians have invented the term "nones," referring to the answer given by many people when asked for a religious preference.

These less confrontational-sounding words connote a variety of meanings, but people who embrace them share a deep skepticism toward the doctrines of Christianity, which has been the religious persuasion of most Americans over the course of the nation's history, despite the fact that at the beginning of our national experiment most of the ex-British colonials who had just forged a union didn't regularly attend church. Many of the prominent white men who wrote the nation's fundamental documents called themselves deists. They believed in a designer Creator, but in none of the core beliefs of Christianity. The virgin birth, the miracles attributed to Jesus, his resurrection and saving grace, heaven and hell—all of these ideas, they thought, flew in the face of reason. So did the belief that the Bible was the revealed word of God. For deists, reason always trumped faith. Deists saw their belief system as irenic. It eschewed the theological squabbles that had caused too many bloody wars in Europe.

Thomas Jefferson believed in progress. For him the peaceful intention of deism marked an important human advance in his revolutionary generation. He saw it, or perhaps Unitarianism, becoming the settled religious view of the American nation. Unitarians remained committed to Christianity even though they professed a skeptical attitude toward many of its central doctrines, including the divinity of Christ and the reality of

biblically recorded miracles. Thomas Jefferson's view on this point proved to be as mistaken as his notion that American slavery would die a natural death. Deism faded away. Americans turned their energies to building and populating churches. In the early nineteenth century, a new generation of American leaders branded nonbelief in a God who intervened in human affairs and who judged humans as fit or unfit for heaven as a scandalous position bordering on moral turpitude. However illogically, they equated deism with atheism. Atheism became a pejorative, a blanket term that covered all forms of religious skepticism. Ministers and politicians used it to attack threats, often more imagined than real, on social order and the rule of law. Individual states had laws that placed a premium on traditional theistic beliefs.

Those laws in part reflected the nervousness attendant to our democratic experiment. We easily forget that our early history was not a period marked by strong national self-confidence or greatness. If it seemed plausible that atheism undermined social stability, that fact justified laws that discriminated against nonbelievers. It didn't strike most early Americans as controversial that people who denied the existence of a divine creator could not hold public office. In many states they could not testify in court, even in their own defense. If they published treatises proclaiming their nonbelief or spoke about it publicly, they could face criminal charges that subjected them to heavy fines or jail terms.

A different point of view remained embedded in the United States Constitution. Its First Amendment, along with a provision in Article 6 banning religious tests for federal offices, suggested that Americans shouldn't face discrimination because of what they believed or didn't believe about God and religion. But until 1940, when the Supreme Court in *Cantwell v. Connecticut* held that the concept of "due process of law" embodied in the Fourteenth Amendment made the religious clauses of the First Amendment applicable to the states, states could follow their own notions of what constituted religious liberty. They were free to write laws based on the assumption that atheism, deism, or religious skepticism posed a danger to the safety and morals of the community. Denied basic civil rights available to most Christians, and usually to Jews, nonbelievers were relegated to second-class citizenship.

American state laws have changed over the years, and nonbelievers have more legal security in the twenty-first century than they had one hundred years ago. Even so, a belief based on theistic religious teachings may still carry more legal weight than a belief based on a secular philosophy. Moreover, on the playing field of public opinion, the rules for believers and nonbelievers are not equal. Whatever the law says, an avowal of atheism effectively disqualifies a person from the nation's highest public offices and many local offices in much of the country. More than half of polled Americans state without equivocation that they would never vote for anyone who doubts the existence of God, whatever his or her qualifications. People who have no use for religion may run for public office, but no political adviser would tell them to declare openly their nonbelief in God.

The view that godless people are dangerous troublemakers received solid reinforcement from America's long engagement in the Cold War. We advertised ourselves as a godly nation locked in doctrinal combat with the atheistic Soviet Union, casting the terms of the engagement in amazingly apocalyptic terms. If evil disbelief triumphed over godly pietism, the free world would end. In this era Congress, with bipartisan enthusiasm, inserted the phrase "under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance and in 1956 adopted "In God We Trust" as the national motto (replacing "E pluribus unum"—"Out of many one") and for the first time placed it on all American currency. But as we shall see, the fierce popular identification of godliness as the basis of American citizenship predated the Cold War. It has lasted well beyond the Cold War's end.

In the second half of our book, we will discuss how jurists have used the phrases "ceremonial deism" or "American civil religion" to condone government-sponsored God references that both formally and informally define a concept of American citizenship. In some important court rulings government-sponsored references to God become not affirmations of a truth espoused by churchgoing citizens but simple affirmations of a common patriotism. That usage flies in the face of plain language and ignores the offense that references to God carry to nontheists on public occasions. It excludes them from full participation in ceremonies that are supposed to join Americans together.

The time has come for a serious reassessment of what it means to continue practices that ground citizenship in theistic belief. Whatever

memories of a religious America we have carried from our past, the religious nature of the population is changing. It's true enough that for most of the nation's history the United States was a Christian country. No law declared that in explicit terms, but the general body of laws as well as cultural practices took it for granted. The great majority of Americans, whether or not they attended church, identified themselves as Christian. In the newspapers and books they read, in the lectures they attended, in their public encounters with fellow citizens, they rarely heard or saw anything that challenged the basic tenets of Christianity. Village atheists existed. Sometimes they drew crowds to their lectures. But numerically they were an oddity. In contrast to many nations of Europe, where religious faith seemed to be waning by the end of the nineteenth century, Americans appeared to be capable of combining their country's strong economic growth and startling technological advances with an unwavering commitment to a belief in God, in the resurrection of the dead, and in an eternal life won by the sacrifice of "Jesus Christ our Lord."

That world no longer exists. The percentage of Americans who describe themselves as atheist remains small—perhaps 4 percent of the population—while the percentage of Americans who profess belief in some kind of God is still large. But that god is not necessarily the sort of personal god worshipped in most of the world's religious traditions. According to the Pew Research Center, 23 percent of adult Americans describe themselves as atheists, agnostics, or belonging to no religion. The number of those militantly indifferent to the teachings of any of America's organized religions swells to eight in ten among millennials. To put these figures in perspective, the number of Americans who are nonbelievers approaches the percentage of Americans who call themselves Christian evangelicals and exceeds the combined total of Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Jews, and Muslims. We are witnessing the rapid rise of a "New Atheism," a social movement that made best sellers out of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith*, Christopher Hitchens's *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*. These uncompromisingly strident treatises unfortunately point to yet another cultural division that plagues this country's democratic system. But not all American nonbelievers are especially militant, if militancy is defined by open hostility to organized religion. In fact, atheist Jews often celebrate

Jewish high holidays. Atheists who were once Presbyterian may put a star atop their Christmas tree.

Yet militant or not, nonbelievers are building a movement. They are rude enough to say something else that has never before been so manifestly true. Our nation's religious leaders no longer constitute a moral elite. The American experience began with an assumption shared even by deists that religion fueled the country's moral supremacy. Even in recent times many nonbelievers sent their children to church to learn moral standards. That has become less and less a reliable strategy. Religious leaders who once were the presidents and trustees of colleges founded by their denomination no longer are academic leaders. Theology that once was the Western world's dominant subject of philosophy and was the subject of best-selling literature into the twentieth century excites little public interest. Many of the most popular religious leaders in America use the pulpit to fight equality for women, demonize women who often face an agonizing choice about ending a pregnancy, or cast as sinners people of the same sex who fall in love. The clientele for such moral instructions is diminishing, especially, as all polling data show, among young Americans.

In our present climate, religious Americans and nonreligious Americans square off against one another and complain about their threatened status. The former see the court-mandated elimination of school prayer and Bible reading as constituting a government glorification of "secular humanism." The latter regard any government-sponsored prayer or references to God on public occasions as an unconstitutional establishment of religion. Our government is supposed to be secular. Hearing a president end a speech with the phrase "God bless the United States of America" may seem small potatoes compared to what religious dissenters once faced when forced to pay taxes to support an established church. Nonetheless, it violates the idea of a secular state and contributes to the notion that nonbelievers are outsiders and don't quite belong in the American family. Male atheists may learn that lesson early in life. They can't join the Boy Scouts.

When George H. W. Bush served as vice president under Ronald Reagan, he supposedly brushed aside a reporter's question about whether atheists were good citizens with the remark: "I don't know that atheists should be regarded as citizens, nor should they be regarded as patriotic." Bush later denied using those words. He needn't have. The opinion would

not have shocked most Americans, both the educated and the uneducated. Bush, a Yale graduate with a Phi Beta Kappa key, was the epitome of the American establishment, and atheists didn't belong in his world.

We cannot write off Bush's comment as an offhand remark made carelessly by a politician seeing an easy way to gratify one set of supporters. In 1984 Richard John Neuhaus, a respected Lutheran pastor who founded the journal *First Things*, published *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America*. The title of the book became a popular term that summarized the book's thesis: courts had banned religion from American public life and as a result had put American democracy in peril. Neuhaus compared the American situation to what happened in Nazi Germany. Writing in his journal seven years later, when Neuhaus had become a Roman Catholic priest, he addressed the same question put to George Bush: could an atheist be a good citizen. His answer was "No." "A good citizen," according to Neuhaus, "is able to give an account, a morally compelling account, of the regime of which he is part." In Neuhaus's intellectual universe only a theist could do that.

Neuhaus was wrong, and in several inexcusable ways. For one thing religion has hardly been driven from the public square. Public ceremonies are riddled with references to God. But more important, there is nothing about the philosophy of atheism that would prevent its adherents in contemporary America from presenting secular reasons to justify the importance of democracy and from positing a secular moral framework necessary to sustain it. Neuhaus's contrary assertion borders on dishonesty. Atheism is not typically a philosophy of nihilism stripping all meaning from human existence but a position of principled conscience grounded on commitments to reason and science and open debate. Hypocrisy is what empties the public square of moral purpose, and nothing encourages hypocrisy more than a god of convenience who finds sin not in what we do but in what our political opponents do.

All of the above points, spelled out in more detail, are the subjects of our book. The main arguments rest on a principle we share with people who may disagree with us on other issues. Religious liberty, which includes the liberty not to believe in God, is a precious right that must be defended along with a more general commitment to equality and equal protection under the law. Where we begin to part company with many religious Americans is

over our belief that “E pluribus unum” is a much better national motto than the more recently substituted “In God We Trust.” The former promotes the hopeful expectation that every generation of Americans will find common ties that can bind together a singularly diverse population. The words of the latter strike at the idea of unity. In our present age dividing Americans into theists and atheists, or churchgoers and religious skeptics, creates a serious gulf that our democracy can ill afford. To understand fully what is at stake, we need to look at our history, since past attitudes toward nonbelief have persisted into our own day. They won’t disappear by magic. We need to understand why atheism was demonized. That story is complicated, but the premise of our book is easily summarized: the reasons used to denounce atheism in America at the beginning of the republic just don’t make sense anymore.

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