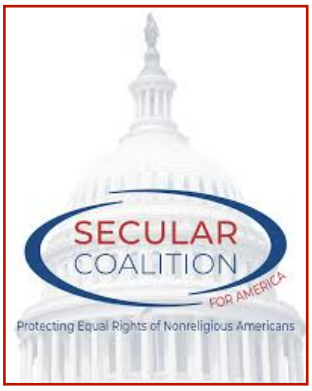
Part Five of a Five-Part Series: Questions Answered by Herb Silverman

The following questions are about cooperation:

Why don't atheists have more influence in our society?



Despite the growing number of atheists, we have not been nearly as influential politically as most other minority groups. That's partly because we take pride in being an independent lot. To gain influence in our culture, we have to become more cooperative and establish our legitimacy as a demographic. That's why I helped form a cooperative organization, the Secular Coalition for America (SCA).

The organization has grown to include 21 national member organizational affiliates covering the full spectrum of atheists and humanists. SCA advocates for the equal rights of nonreligious Americans, and defends the separation of religion and government. SCA incorporated as a political advocacy group to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans, with lobbyists in Washington, D.C.

Does the Secular Coalition for America have anything to do with donating to charity?

SCA works on civil rights and children's rights, as well as health and safety issues. Affiliate member organizations do a lot of charity work. For example, the Freethought Society's Helping Hands Committee serves homebound seniors in need; American Atheists conducts meal packing events to meet community food needs; the Center for Inquiry has Secular Rescue which helps individuals fleeing anti-secular regimes to gain freedom; and so much more community charity work is done by the chapters of SCA affiliates.

Are changes taking place fast enough?

Some may be discouraged because we haven't seen change fast enough, but we are evolutionists, not creationists. Evolution takes a long time. Whenever I feel discouraged by slow progress, I keep this in mind: If we do nothing, nothing will change. You don't have to do it all, but I hope secularists will find something positive to do for our movement.

What should we avoid doing with Christians?

Don't stereotype Christians. Religious people don't like it any more than atheists. We must not assume all Christians are fundamentalists who need to justify ridiculous biblical passages. Atheists don't need to try to fight every battle. We haven't the resources or political capital to respond to every offense.

What worked best for you in cooperating with religious people?

One of my math students once told me after class that he was a member of First Baptist Church, the oldest Southern Baptist church in the South. He had seen an article about my atheist worldview and activism in the local newspaper.

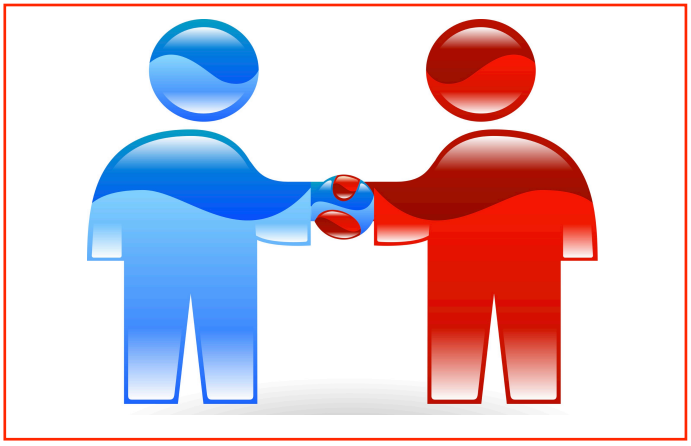
My student said both Southern Baptists and secular humanists probably had unfair stereotypes of each other, and it might be a good idea to get together for group discussions. I heartily agreed, and we arranged for several members of each group to meet for brunch at a local deli.

*One of the participants, Dr. **Mitch Carnell**, was a Sunday school teacher at the First Baptist Church. He also wrote a weekly column for the Charleston Post and Courier. The title of Carnell's piece on September 25, 1995, was "Good Conversation Is Lurking if You Look." In the article about the discussions, Carnell wrote:*

> *"We were meeting to discuss religious beliefs or the lack of them. We knew in advance that we not only disagreed with each other, but that our views were directly opposite of each other's. Yet, by all accounts, the event was a rousing success. People not only enjoyed it, but also wanted to continue the discussions. Why? Because there was mutual respect for the individual."*

And that was the key for success. Both groups chose representatives who knew how to disagree without being disagreeable. We continued to meet periodically, and even gave a name to our group: BASH which is the acronym for "Baptists And Secular Humanists."

The BASH meetings consisted of good conversations along with refreshments. We got to know each other and learn about different perspectives and worldviews. Priority was given to finding common ground, without attempting conversion. We measured success by the number of new friendships that were formed. We were successful, but none of us became talk-show hosts or politicians.



What are the problems that arise when working with theists on politics?

Politics is the art of negotiation and compromise, which rarely works with theists who claim to have the absolute truth.

What unites people, regardless of religious belief?

We must respect all human beings. Humans create problems and humans can solve them — in a peaceful way if we try hard enough to do it. Far more important than nationalities or religious creeds that can divide us is our common humanity, which unites us.

Any other benefits to working with different groups?
Working with diverse groups provides the additional benefit of gaining more visibility and respect for our unique perspective. Improving the public perception of secular Americans is as important to many of us as pursuing a particular political agenda. Politicians think they are being tolerant when they express support for all faiths; instead, we hope to hear them express support for all faiths and no faith at all. A statement such as this recognizes freedom of conscience for all.

Where does character come in?
*The conservative politician **J.C. Watts** once said, "Character is doing the right thing when nobody is looking." By that definition, only atheists are capable of showing character.*

Do you believe the meek will inherent the Earth?
If the meek are to inherit something of value, we must seek ways to understand and respect those with whom we have significant disagreements.

What should we do when communicating with people with whom we disagree?
Listen carefully to what they say, and try to understand them. You might find that they make some sense. Look for points of agreement and see how you can work together on them.

The religious community has music that people find inspiring. What does the nontheist community have musically to offer?
*The best known atheist singer is **Dan Barker**, creating wonderful songs like "Nothing Fails Like Prayer" and "Beware of Dogma." **Shelley Segal** is another excellent performer whose songs convey atheist values, philosophy, and poetic messages of love, friendship, and happiness. Segal and Barker often perform together. Below is a photo of these two musical giants.*

As religious folks celebrate their beautiful and traditional holidays, what are nontheists doing?
Many nontheists celebrate the Winter Solstice in recognition of the natural world and the changing of the seasons, Ironically, Christians turned the Winter Solstice into the date of the proposed "birth of Christ."December 25 eventually became known as Christmas. During the Winter holiday season many other nontheists celebrate HumanLight. It is is a secular holiday celebrated on December 23 that embraces and celebrates the value of human achievements, science, and an appreciation of the natural world.

The Spring Equinox is recognized in a similar way with family get-togethers and some nontheist groups doing charity work to lift up others in need.

Religious folks have many heroic figures, saints, and biblical stories for people to learn from and emulate. Are there inspirational people in the nontheist community who are admired and what kind of stories do nontheists relate to in order to find their morals and ethics?
While we don't worship anyone, we do have many freethought heroes. They include:

***Thomas Paine**,*
who wrote The Age of Reason

***Robert Green Ingersoll**,*
known as the "Great Agnostic,"
and passionately promoted freethought

***Bertrand Russell**,*
a well-known atheist, who said:
"The good life is one inspired by love
and guided by knowledge"

*Today, we have the national Congressional Freethought Caucus (CFC) which promotes evidence-based public policy. CFC was formed in 2018. It includes two "humanist" secular members of Congress, **Jared Huffman** (D-CA) and **Jamie Raskin** (D-MD). The Congressional Freethought Caucus now has 23 members and continues to grow. There are also more than 50 state legislators who identify with the atheist and humanist community. Their efforts to maintain separation of religion and government makes them all heroes in our nontheist/secular community.*

Herb Silverman is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's (FS) quarterly publication, *The Freethought Society News*.

The editors are grateful for all of his excellent submissions. Silverman's past articles can be found at the following FS website page:

https://www.ftsociety.org/herb-silverman-articles/

Silverman is the author of two very popular books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available online and at your local bookstores.

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