

# America, one nation under no God?

The number of secular Americans is rising faster than any other religious group. But faith will continue to influence politics



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In recent years, non-religious Americans have won a modicum of public acknowledgment. Not long ago, politicians insulted them with impunity or at best simply overlooked them. But the heightened public religious fervour of the [Bush years](#) led the country's infidels to organise as never before, turning atheist authors like [Sam Harris](#) into celebrities and opening lobbying offices in Washington, DC, just like religious interest groups do.

Politicians have responded. In his [inaugural address](#), Barack Obama – doubtlessly realising that secularists constitute a big part of his base – described America as a "nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus ... and non-believers." Even [Mitt Romney](#) came to express second thoughts about leaving atheists and agnostics out of his high-profile [campaign speech on faith](#). The [United States](#) is not Europe – it will likely be a long time before we have a publicly agnostic president – but it is becoming more tolerant of the godless.

It has to be: no religious group in the United States is growing as fast as those who profess [no religion](#) at all. The latest [American Religious Identification Survey](#), which [Trinity College](#) published last week, shows that the number of non-religious Americans has nearly doubled since 1990, while the number of people who specifically self-identity as atheists or agnostics has more than tripled. An astonishing 30% of married Americans weren't wed in religious ceremonies, and 27% don't expect to have religious funerals. This suggests whole swaths of the culture are becoming secular, since one can assume that non-believers in religious families often acquiesce to traditional marriage rites and expect to be prayed over when they're dead.

The irony, though, is that even as the country becomes more secular, American politics are likely to remain shot through with aggressive piety. What we're seeing is not a northern European-style mellowing, but an increasing polarisation. In his recent book [Society without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment](#), the sociologist Phil Zuckerman described the secularised countries of Scandinavia as places where religion is regarded with "benign indifference". There's consensus instead of culture war. That's not what's happening in the United States. Instead, the centre is falling out.

According to the American Religious Identification Survey, Christianity is losing ground in the United States, but evangelical Christianity is not. Just over a third of Americans are still born-again. Meanwhile, the mainline churches, beacons of progressive, rationalistic faith – the kind that could potentially act as a bridge between religious and non-religious Americans – are shrinking. "These trends ... suggest a movement towards more conservative beliefs and particularly to a more 'evangelical' outlook among Christians," write the report's authors.

In some ways, there's a symbiotic relationship between evangelicals and secularists. The [religious right](#) emerged in response to a widespread sense of cultural grievance stemming from the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s. Today's newly organised atheists and agnostics were mobilised by the theocratic bombast of Bush-era Republicans. More than ever, one's religion is tied up with one's political choices rather than family history.

That means faith won't fade into the background. If European secularism is defined by disinterest in organised religion, American secularism is largely defined by opposition to it. Thus non-believers in the United States are increasingly becoming an organised interest group, demanding their share of civic respect. The more they want to escape organised religion, the less they can ignore it.