

SICK AND TIRED OF « GOD BLESS AMERICA »

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THE population of nonreligious Americans — including atheists, agnostics and those who call themselves “nothing in particular” — stands at an all-time high this election year. Americans who say religion is not important in their lives and who do not belong to a religious group, according to the Pew Research Center, have risen in numbers from an estimated 21 million in 2008 to more than 36 million now.

Despite the extraordinary swiftness and magnitude of this shift, our political campaigns are still conducted as if all potential voters were among the faithful. The presumption is that candidates have everything to gain and nothing to lose by continuing their obsequious attitude toward orthodox religion and ignoring the growing population of those who make up a more secular America.

Ted Cruz won in Iowa by expanding Republican voter turnout among the evangelical base. Donald J. Trump placed second after promising “to protect Christians” from enemies foreign and domestic. The third-place finisher Marco Rubio’s line “I don’t think you can go to church too often” might well have been the campaign mantra. Mr. Rubio was first christened a Roman Catholic, baptized again at the age of 8 into the Mormon Church, and now attends a Southern Baptist megachurch with his wife on Saturdays and Catholic Mass on Sundays.

Democrats are only a trifle more secular in their appeals. Hillary Clinton repeatedly refers to her Methodist upbringing, and even Bernie Sanders — a cultural Jew not known to belong to a synagogue — squirms when asked whether he believes in God. When Jimmy Kimmel posed the question, Mr. Sanders replied in a fog of words at odds with his usual blunt style: “I am who I am. And what I believe in and what my spirituality is about, is that we’re all in this together.” He once referred to a “belief in God” that requires him to follow the Golden Rule — a quote his supporters seem to trot out whenever someone suggests he’s an atheist or agnostic.

The question is not why nonreligious Americans vote for these candidates — there is no one on the ballot who full-throatedly endorses nonreligious humanism — but why candidates themselves ignore the growing group of secular voters.

Yes, America is still a predominantly Christian nation, but evangelical Christians (including multiple Protestant denominations), at 25.4 percent, are the only group larger than those who don’t belong to any church. At 22.8 percent, according to Pew, the unchurched make up a larger group than

Catholics, any single Protestant denomination and small minorities of Jews, Muslims and Hindus.

Critics have suggested that there is no such entity as secular America, because the nonreligious do not all share the same values. One might just as easily say the same thing about the religious. President Jimmy Carter, for example, left the Southern Baptist Convention because he disagreed with its views about women — but Mr. Carter remains his own kind of devout and liberal Baptist in the tradition of his 18th-century religious forebears.

Secularists remain politically weak in part because of the reluctance of many, especially the young, to become “joiners.” Rejection of labels may be one reason so many of the religiously unaffiliated prefer to check “nothing in particular” rather than the atheist or agnostic box.

But it takes joiners to create a lobby. The American Center for Law and Justice, an organization focused on the rights of Christians, gathered more than a million signatures on a petition protesting the imprisonment of Saeed Abedini, an Iranian-American pastor and convert from Islam who was one of four Americans freed in last month’s prisoner swap.

For small secular organizations, a million signatures for any cause would constitute a supernatural happening. I spent a few years working for the Center for Inquiry, a humanist think tank that merged last month, in a rare union of secular forces, with the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science. Michael De Dora, the center’s public policy director, argues that secularists must work with liberal and mainstream religious groups on issues of mutual concern.

Yet there is some controversy over coalition building between those who consider themselves “hard” and “soft” atheists. I suppose I must be a “soft” atheist for believing that there is a huge political upside to ad hoc coalitions with liberal religious groups.

Freedom of conscience for all — which exists only in secular democracies — should be at the top of the list of shared concerns. Candidates who rightly denounce the persecution of Christians by radical Islamists should be ashamed of themselves for not expressing equal indignation at the persecution of freethinkers and atheists, as well as dissenting Muslims and small religious sects, not only by terrorists but also by theocracies like Saudi Arabia. With liberal religious allies, it would be easier for secularists to hold candidates to account when they talk as if freedom of conscience is a human right only for the religious.

Even more critical is the necessity of reclaiming the language of religious freedom from the far right. As defined by many pandering politicians,

“religious freedom” is in danger of becoming code for accepting public money while imposing faith-based values on others.

Anyone who dismisses the importance of taking back this language should consider the gravity of the mistake made by supporters of legal abortion when they allowed the anti-abortion movement to claim the term “pro-life” after *Roe v. Wade*.

Secularists must hold candidates to account when they insult secular values, whether that means challenging them in town hall meetings or withholding donations. Why, for example, would any secular Republican (yes, there are some) think of supporting the many Republican politicians who have denied the scientific validity of evolution? Politicians will continue to ignore secular Americans until they are convinced that there is a price to be paid for doing so.

“God bless America” has become the standard ending of every major political speech. Just once in my life, I would like the chance to vote for a presidential candidate who ends his or her appeals with Thomas Paine’s observation that “the most formidable weapon against errors of every kind is Reason.”

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