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Age: 53

Adult 19 years and older

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Most people who rail about their First Amendment rights being under attack are looking to *do* something: speak their minds, distribute their opinions, assemble their allies. I'm looking to *not* do something: believe in God.

Believe it or not, eight states still have bans against atheists holding office, despite the U.S. Constitution stating that religious tests cannot be a prerequisite for getting elected. People with secular beliefs as potential candidates in hypothetical elections do not receive majority votes, while candidates representing other marginalized groups, do.

Actual office holders, in the wake of national tragedies, often blame the rise of secularism for a school shooting or other mass murder, ignoring the blatant prejudice against non-believers that this promotes.


Aside from removing unenforceable bans from state constitutions and calling out politicians for discriminatory statements made in an effort to soothe a frightened public, what can be done to protect freedom of religion (or lack thereof)?

There is no better way to combat stigma against a secular identity than by making that identity known. Much like the philosophy of October 11 as Coming Out Day, which encourages members of the LGBTQIA community (who can safely do so) to come out to family and friends, October 19 is Openly Secular Day.

On that day I am planning to advertise my secular identity by using #OpenlySecular on social media, contact my representatives to tell them I am a secular values voter, and tell my favorite teaching anecdote about an interfaith experience that helped to foster an understanding of my secular identity.

As a sixth grade teacher, one of the first units I taught every year was about archeology and fossils, essentially: evolution. I prefaced the unit with a very simple and sincere statement that the content of this unit was not meant to conflict with anyone's religious beliefs. Two months later during conference week, a parent told me that her son had come home the day we started that unit and told her what I had said.

Although, according to their religious beliefs, she would have otherwise asked that her child be excused from this particular subject and given an alternate assignment, they felt so respected by my disclaimer that she chose to let her son stay in the classroom during that hour.



I was so touched by this revelation that I was motivated to read a book about creationism as a way of educating myself about another belief identity. (I like to do my reading in coffee houses here in Davis, which provided a myriad of opportunities for me to share this anecdote!)

Rather than stirring a tempest in Russell's teapot, these conversations can help break down the misconceptions that can cause people to villainize those with a secular identity and help make sure that the freedom to *not* practice a religion is just as protected as the freedom to do so.