



NATIONAL ENDOWMENT FOR THE HUMANITIES

DIVISION OF RESEARCH PROGRAMS

Narrative Section of a Successful Application

The attached document contains the grant narrative and selected portions of a previously funded grant application. It is not intended to serve as a model, but to give you a sense of how a successful application may be crafted. Every successful application is different, and each applicant is urged to prepare a proposal that reflects its unique project and aspirations. Prospective applicants should consult the Research Programs application guidelines at <https://www.neh.gov/grants/research/fellowships> for instructions.

Note: The attachment only contains the grant narrative and selected portions, not the entire funded application. In addition, certain portions may have been redacted to protect the privacy interests of an individual and/or to protect confidential commercial and financial information and/or to protect copyrighted materials.

Project Title: Temples of Humanity: A Religious History of American Secularism

Institution: Washington University in St. Louis

Project Director: Leigh Eric Schmidt

Grant Program: Fellowships

Temples of Humanity: A Religious History of American Secularism

When the French philosopher Pierre Bayle suggested at the end of the seventeenth century that religion was not a necessity for the maintenance of civil society, the proposition was widely greeted with alarm. A century and a half later the idea still provoked disgust. As a Protestant writer in Boston remarked in 1837, "A nation of Atheists is a nation of fiends." For skeptics, freethinkers, and avowed secularists, this was a recurrent challenge: proving that their emergent unbelief—their often halting movement out of Christianity and Judaism—was congruent with community, social solidarity, and virtuous citizenship. Hence they worked time and again to construct a viable religion of humanity—and the sanctuaries, rituals, and monuments to materialize their humanistic, this-worldly faith. "Temples of Humanity" offers the first full history of these ritualistic, community-building labors within American freethinking circles from the Enlightenment forward. It explores how deists, free inquirers, agnostics, Comtean positivists, humanists, and liberal cosmopolitans sought to salvage forms of religious association and ethical obligation beyond the bounds of the Christian and Jewish communities they had left.

The study of secularism has been a growth industry across the humanities over the last two decades. Much of that work has offered a critical, discursive analysis of how the secular has been deployed to demarcate what counts as good religion—the private and interior, the disembodied and de-ritualized, the nonsectarian. Secularism is thus forged as a disciplinary tool: for example, to regulate "fundamentalist" forms of religion inimical to liberal political norms or to remap indigenous cultures for purposes of imperial administration. This literature is now vast and represents a significant series of interventions. A second major strand of scholarship has continued to be preoccupied with secularism as a narrative of modern disenchantment, particularly the erosion of Christian faith in the face of scientific naturalism and "exclusive humanism." This field of inquiry remains anchored in intellectual history, dwelling both on internal accommodations within Christian theological enterprises, Protestant and Catholic, as well as on external challenges that promoted "cognitive demystification." A third academic thread has been an increasingly robust sociology of the non-religious. Particularly tracking the surge in religious disaffiliation in the United States over the last two decades, this literature focuses on the newness of the "atheist awakening," the growing visibility of nonbelievers and secularists in American public life. "Temples of Humanity" draws on these three strands of scholarship, while at the same time pushing secular studies into more on-the-ground, historical engagement with a lived, material, and embodied secularism. No one has paid concerted attention to the considerable efforts over more than two centuries of freethinking devotees to build shrines of reason and churches of humanity as hubs of collective solidarity and ethical striving. From this vantage, it is fully possible to write a religious history of American secularism, one centrally concerned with the song-books and liturgies, statuary and architecture, lifecycle rituals and congregational fellowships, Sunday schools and moral primers of those who imagined—in various guises—a new religion of humanity.

The book project begins with a pervasive early modern conviction: namely, that it would be impossible to sustain a commonwealth, or any community at all, without a belief in God. "Why is a society of atheists thought impossible?" the American deist Elihu Palmer asked in the pages of the Temple of Reason, following a prompt from Voltaire. "Because it is thought that men" without the restraint of an avenging God "could never live together" and would dissolve immediately into wickedness. "A community of Atheists cannot exist," a Protestant writer gloated in 1857 when reporting the belated failure of Abner Kneeland's "Infidel Colony" in Salubria, Iowa. Against that Christian commonplace, freethinking dissidents—including Palmer, Kneeland, Ernestine Rose, Thomas Herttell, and Gilbert Vale—labored to show that they could organize the enlightened and the heterodox into workable moral communities that would survive the contumely of the faithful. That remained a tall order in the decades between the Revolution and the Civil War, but it was not insurmountable. Working through radical Owenite channels, the

Jewish infidel Ernestine Rose helped a society of “Moral Philanthropists” flourish in New York in the 1830s, a group that one guidebook listed as “a congregation of Atheists” alongside the city’s innumerable places of worship. Memorializing Tom Paine’s birthday had become a ritual focus for secularist celebration by the 1820s and 1830s, and that devotion had its own monuments and pilgrimage sites, the first in New Rochelle, New York, in 1839. Early in the next century Paine’s American admirers would even locate bodily relics to display at a museum there. Meanwhile, Unitarian ranks were already bubbling with post-Christian dissenters—from Emerson to Octavius Frothingham—who would soon inspire a series of Independent Liberal Churches.

The second section of the book sinks into the generative secularist experiments that followed in the decades after the Civil War. Some of these were almost utopian, such as freethinker George Walser’s founding of Liberal, Missouri, in 1880 in the southwest corner of the state. He imagined it as an Ingersollian paradise, one centered on a lecture hall dedicated to mental liberty without any churches or ministers to vex its gathered liberals. Likewise, freethinkers in Oregon had a field day imagining new secularist communities, including Liberal University in Silverton and First Secular Church in Portland. The former attracted the leadership of a Princeton-educated, New York lawyer named Thaddeus B. Wakeman, and the latter—under the inspiration of lecturer Katie Kehm Smith—became one of the largest churches in the state in the 1890s. More enduring was Felix Adler’s new denominational network of Ethical Culture Societies with major communities in New York, Chicago, St. Louis, and London. Archival records survive for each of these Ethical Culture congregations, and those files provide especially full access into the week-to-week textures of humanistic fellowship in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Also in this epoch a handful of manuals for secularist celebration and lifecycle rituals began to appear, including D. M. Bennett’s Truth Seeker Collection of Hymns, Forms, and Recitations (1877) and A. R. Ayres’s A Secular Marriage and Funeral Ritual and Collection of Secular Hymns (1885). The latter was put together for a fellowship of Agnostic Moralists headquartered in Hannibal, Missouri. The actual use of such secular liturgies can be traced through freethought periodical literature of the era, especially through detailed accounts of funerals wrested from the hands of the clergy.

The third and fourth sections turn to the humanistic religious communities of the twentieth century. These include: M. M. Mangasarian’s Independent Religious Society and Jenkin Lloyd Jones’s Abraham Lincoln Center (Chicago), John Emerson Roberts’s Church of This World and Leon Birkhead’s Liberal Center (Kansas City), John H. Dietrich’s First Unitarian Society (Minneapolis), Theodore Abell’s Hollywood Humanist Society (Los Angeles), Ethelred Brown’s Harlem Unitarian Church and Charles Francis Potter’s First Humanist Society (New York City). All of these humanistic fellowships flourished in the early decades of the twentieth century, often boasting memberships and architectural spaces that rivalled more orthodox bodies (Frank Lloyd Wright’s Unity Temple in Oak Park, Illinois, is a shining example). Along with numerous other allied congregations across the country, these societies embodied an activist, post-Christian, yet religiously engaged liberalism. Also critical were parallel developments within Jewish circles. Particularly important after mid-century was the work of Sherwin T. Wine, an erstwhile Reform rabbi whose Birmingham Temple outside Detroit became the center for the elaboration of a humanistic, openly agnostic Judaism. Organizing an umbrella group called the Society for Humanistic Judaism in 1969, Wine developed educational and ritual materials for more than two dozen affiliated communities. By the time of his death in 2007, Wine had left a considerable legacy, particularly evident in the work of his student Greg Epstein, Humanist Chaplain at Harvard, whose bestselling Good Without God emerged as one of the leading barometers for the surging importance of religious “nones” in the new millennium.

Alongside the humanist chaplaincies of Chris Stedman (Yale) and Bart Campolo (USC/Cincinnati), Epstein’s community at Harvard brings the book to conclusion. Philosopher

Alain de Botton's Religion for Atheists is another noteworthy example of the ongoing exploration of the possibilities for ritual, celebration, and social solidarity among secularists. Groups hoping to implement the vision of Epstein or de Botton include such new gatherings as the Sunday Assembly and Oasis. The epilogue looks, too, at the Satanic Temple, local chapters of which delight in secularist burlesque of rightwing evangelicalism. Indeed, the points of humanistic dialogue range well beyond Christianity and Judaism at this point, evident especially in the emergent interest in "secular Buddhism" and the practices to concretize that.

This history will require painstaking research, archival and otherwise. I have already done, over the last five-plus years, substantial work on various pieces of this project. For example, I have considerable materials and writing done on the secularist experiments in Liberal and Hannibal, Missouri, as well as Silverton and Portland, Oregon. I have begun to explore key archives, including the extensive papers of humanist organizer Edwin H. Wilson at Southern Illinois University and a similarly large holding for Unitarian Jenkin Lloyd Jones at Meadville Lombard Theological School. I have visited the Wisconsin Historical Society and the New York Public Library, which house two of the most extensive pamphlet and ephemera collections for studying American secularist communities. Also, it helps that the research for this book builds in important ways on my prior work on both religious liberalism and secularism, including Restless Souls (2005), Heaven's Bride (2010), and especially Village Atheists (2016). In the last I dwelled on the long secularist campaign for the minority rights of freethinkers against a Protestant majority, and now in this project I want to call attention not to their social and legal marginalization, but to their persistent collectivity, their rites of community. Though having little direct overlap with these previous books in terms of major characters or focal topics, "Temples of Humanity" is a much more feasible project for me to accomplish because of that previous research. I have, for example, already worked my way through much of the nineteenth-century freethinking literature, including major periodicals such as the Boston Investigator, Truth Seeker, Torch of Reason, and Free Thought Magazine. Still, even with that foundation, there remains much archival work yet to be done, including exploration of the Felix Adler and Moncure Conway Papers (Columbia), the Sherwin T. Wine Papers (University of Michigan), the Thomas Paine Archive and Ethical Church Archive (Bishopsgate Institute, London), and the John H. Dietrich Papers (Minnesota Historical Society). I intend to accomplish much of that archival research in advance of the fellowship in 2019-2020, so that I can spend the bulk of that year in residence in St. Louis drafting the majority of the book manuscript.

At this point, with the help of the NEH grant, I would plan on having the manuscript done in three years and delivering it to a top university press or leading trade house in the summer of 2021. Though crafted with an academic audience in mind, the book will also be accessible to curious and well-informed general readers. I am committed to jargon-free prose and view the historical craft as a public-minded narrative art. The book seems well timed to make a difference in both academic discussions and civic conversations: Scholars across a wide variety of fields have been intent on critically expanding secular studies, while the growing number of religious "nones" and the continuing provocations of the "new atheists" have made the non-religious a topic of wide interest in the media. The relationship between believers and nonbelievers is a matter of serious consequence for American civil society, especially since the religious/non-religious divide is often mapped onto deep rifts in party politics. "Temples of Humanity" will provide the historical framework, for specialists and non-specialists alike, to consider anew all the middle-ground possibilities that the humanistic engagement with religion has generated since the Enlightenment—from deistic societies to Unitarian "free religion" to Ethical Culture to secular Judaism. Questions about community, ritual, and the moral imagination do not fall neatly into a religious and secular binary, but confound the distinction, all too evident in the various embodiments of a religion of humanity over the last two centuries.

Bibliography

- Asad, Talal. *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003.
- Baker, Joseph O., and Buster G. Smith. *American Secularism: Cultural Contours of Nonreligious Belief Systems*. New York: New York University Press, 2015.
- Blankholm, Joseph. "Secularism and Secular People." *Public Culture* 30 (2018): 245-268.
- Cady, Linell E. and Tracy Fessenden, eds. *Religion, the Secular, and the Politics of Sexual Difference*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2013.
- Cimino, Richard, and Christopher Smith. *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Engelke, Matthew. "The Coffin Question: Death and Materiality in Humanist Funerals." *Material Religion* 11 (2015): 26-48.
- Fessenden, Tracy. *Culture and Redemption: Religion, the Secular, and American Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007.
- Floyd-Thomas, Juan M. *The Origins of Black Humanism: Reverend Ethelred Brown and the Unitarian Church*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.
- Grasso, Christopher. *Skepticism and American Faith from the Revolution to the Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Hunter, Michael and David Wootton, eds. *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.
- Jacoby, Susan. *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*. New York: Holt, 2004.
- Jakobsen, Janet R. and Ann Pellegrini, eds. *Secularisms*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2008.
- Kirkley, Evelyn A. *Rational Mothers and Infidel Gentlemen: Gender and American Atheism, 1865-1915*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000.
- Kraut, Benny. *From Reform Judaism to Ethical Culture: The Religious Evolution of Felix Adler*. Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1979.
- Marty, Martin. *The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion*. Cleveland: World Publishing, 1961.
- Modern, John Lardas. *Secularism in Antebellum America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.
- Persons, Stow. *Free Religion: An American Faith*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1947.
- Pinn, Anthony. *African American Humanist Principles*. New York: Palgrave, 2004.
- Post, Albert. *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.
- Schlereth, Eric R. *An Age of Infidels: The Politics of Religious Controversy in the Early United States*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013.
- Scott, Joan Wallach. *Sex and Secularism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018.
- Smith, Christian, ed. *The Secular Revolution: Power, Interests, and Conflict in the Secularization of American Public Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.
- Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Turner, James. *Without God, without Creed: The Origins of Unbelief in America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.
- Warren, Sidney. *American Freethought, 1860-1914*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1943.
- Zuckerman, Phil and John R. Shook. *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017.