

Study of secularism sees boost on college campuses

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) Almost every major college and university offers a degree in religious studies. But secularism? Nary a one -- until now.

Starting this fall, Pitzer College, a small liberal arts school in Southern California, will offer a bachelor's degree in secular studies.

The degree is the first of its kind in the United States, according to the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture at Trinity College.

Though the program is a first, it may not stand alone for long. Scholars say there is a growing interest in secularism -- the rejection of religion in public, and sometimes private, life -- both in the U.S. and around the world.

"We've been studying religious people for years, but there is a huge chunk of humanity who is not religious," said Phil Zuckerman, a sociology professor and founder of the Pitzer program. "Who are they? I would like to study them with the same vigor we study religiosity."

So, it seems, would others:

-- The Humanist Institute, the educational arm of the American Humanist Association, hopes to establish this year the country's first master's program in humanism, a philosophy that substitutes human morality and reasoning for belief in the supernatural.

-- "Secularism and Nonreligion," the first academic journal devoted to the subject, will debut in January.

-- San Diego State University will host a first-of-its-kind international conference in September examining the rise of unbelief in the West.

-- The Society for the Scientific Study of Religion will host a half-dozen sessions dealing with secularism at its October meeting. Ten years ago, there were none.

"There are a number of academics out there looking into this with great interest," said Roy Speckhardt, executive director of the American Humanist Association. "Part of the reason it is growing is we are realizing the demographics it represents is huge and growing and national academia is interested in getting involved."

In 2008, the American Religious Identification Survey found that the percentage of American adults who say they have no religion had nearly doubled since 1990 to 34 million people -- 15 percent of U.S. adults.

More critical for colleges and universities, one-third of Americans under 30 reported they had no religion in 2001, according to another ARIS poll. And the Secular Student Alliance, a campus-based organization of nonreligious college and high school students, has grown from 100 groups in 2008 to 219 in 2010.

"There is just no question that there is a hunger in the U.S. by nonreligious people to express their secularism and know more about it," Zuckerman said.

One factor may be the so-called "New Atheists" movement popularized by the best-selling books of Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Characterized by a take-no-prisoners attack on religion, the New Atheists' often strident denunciations of faith have drawn extensive media coverage.

"They made a big noise and are continuing to make a big noise," said Ryan Cragun, a sociologist at the University of Tampa who will co-edit the new journal. "It is now okay to say I am interested in this topic and I want to study it."

The Humanist Institute has long offered a three-year certification in humanism for college graduates. Now, plans and money are in place with Goddard College in Plainfield, Vt., to establish a master's degree, perhaps as early as December.

"It would give a certain level of recognition that would attract a lot more people to the program and raise the stakes on how qualified and functional the folks who complete it are," Speckhardt said.

At Pitzer, students pursuing the new degree will take 10 core courses that examine secularism within the framework of art, literature, politics and science. They will also take religious studies courses.

Class titles include "Anxiety in the Age of Reason," "The Secular Life" and "God, Darwin and Design in America."

Kiley Lawrence, a 19-year-old, pre-med student from Kansas, plans to study for the new degree.

"I'm excited to study why people are so quick to relinquish scientific curiosity in favor of 'heaven only knows' and also, why a standpoint of skepticism has been so stigmatized over the years," she said.

"I think what I'll get out of it is some greater insight into the workings of religion in society, a greater appreciation for scientific investigation, and how the two relate to each other."

But some academics raise concerns about secular studies programs and degrees.

Barry Kosmin, director of Trinity College's secularism center, which helps educators incorporate secular studies in their curricula, said he prefers to see secularism examined within other fields, like biology, politics and especially religious studies.

They must also avoid any taint of activism, Kosmin said. "The mere mention of the words 'secular studies' is enough for some people to turn around and say it is advocacy. What they have to do is have a variety of viewpoints."

Cragun said it will be difficult to interest students in a degree in secular studies. Where would he tell them they could find work?

Zuckerman is aware of the criticism and said "religion-bashing" is not on the syllabus. And secular studies would be "a tolerated stepchild," he said, within another department. "I want to be on equal footing" with other fields of study, he said.

So what will a twentysomething do with a degree in secular studies?

That may be beside the point, at least for now.

"It might not get them a job at Google nor even at McDonalds," Kosmin said. "But secularism is necessary for educating the modern mind. It is not a new approach to learning, but it is a new way of looking at the world and I think it might invigorate liberal arts education."