

Nonbelievers to rally for unbelief in Washington

by [Kimberly Winston](#)

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(RNS) Thousands of atheists and nonbelievers will gather this Saturday (March 24) on the National Mall in Washington for the "Reason Rally," a daylong event featuring speakers, music and comedy to promote secular values.

The goal of the event is to "unify, energize and embolden secular people nationwide," said Jesse Galef, a Reason Rally spokesman.

"For this many of us to come together is hopefully a sign of things to come," Galef said. "Greater organization, greater cooperation and greater awareness nationally of who we are."

Organization and participation within the secular movement is growing. Atheists held their first mass gathering on the National Mall in 2002, with "The Godless March on Washington," an event that attracted 2,000 participants, according to news reports at the time. As many as 30,000 people are expected to attend this year's event.

The growing visibility mirrors the growth of secular Americans overall. The 2008 American Religious Identification Survey found that 15 percent of American adults identify as having no religion -- up from 8.1 percent in 1990.

Ten years ago, The Godless March had a single sponsor -- American Atheists. Today, that group is joined by 19 others in sponsoring the Reason Rally, including support from The Brights, a group with a naturalistic worldview; the James Randi Educational Foundation, a skeptics group; and the Society for Humanistic Judaism. About half of the supporting organizations did not exist at the time of the 2002 Godless March on Washington.

Paul Fidalgo, a spokesman for The Center for Inquiry, another rally sponsor, said such cooperation is "a marker" for the secular movement and community.

"It says to the folks in the movement, 'Look what we can accomplish,'" he said. "We can pool our resources and put something big and positive together. What else can we do if we put our collective minds to it?"

The event is being billed as positive and free of "religion-bashing." But several speakers, including Richard Dawkins, bestselling author of "The God Delusion" and comedian Bill Maher, who will speak via video, are known for antagonism to religion.

Also scheduled to appear are Nate Phelps, the atheist son of anti-gay pastor Fred Phelps of Westboro Baptist Church, and Jessica Ahlquist, the Rhode Island student who successfully sued to have a school prayer banner removed from her high school. Adam Savage, host of television's "Mythbusters," will also speak.

The event is expected to draw protests. A contingent from Phelps's small church that's best known for picketing military funerals has promised to be on hand.