

BELIEVERS' REACTIONS TO OPENING UP SECULAR

For many people, navigating their feelings about their faith and their secular loved one is messy. It is important to be informed about how family and friends may react to secular disclosure as you work with and support people of faith with secular loved ones.

Common Reactions to Secular Disclosure

Initially, religious people react in ways that express hurt. They often:

- 🌀 Cry, get angry, feel insulted, or refuse to participate in the discussion.
- 🌀 Deny or reject their loved one's secular beliefs.
- 🌀 Tell secular loved ones that they're wrong or don't really believe as they do.
- 🌀 Automatically assume that secular loved ones are depressed or that leaving faith is the result of unhappiness or trauma unrelated to religion.
- 🌀 Conflate rejecting faith with a rejection of family traditions and values.
- 🌀 Use hurtful stereotypes to describe the secular loved ones.
- 🌀 Use religious texts to justify their disapproval and condemnation. In the most extreme cases, secular people have been evicted from their homes and/or lost their family's financial support.

What You Can Do: Lead by Example

Coexistence is a framework that encourages inclusivity and guides interactions in an interfaith context. The Secular Safe Zone (www.secularsafezone.org) is a great resource with tools that can help you facilitate secular coexistence. As a religious leader, you can increase inclusivity and coexistence by:

- 🌀 In sermons, homilies, and informal conversations, speak positively about secular people. Encourage your congregation to take part in Openly Secular Allyship.
- 🌀 Provide educational programs which dispel stereotypes and myths.
- 🌀 Offer programs that openly discuss secular beliefs.
- 🌀 Educate other clergy about the issues facing secular people and their religious families and friends.

ABOUT OPENLY SECULAR

Openly Secular is a coalition project that promotes tolerance and equality of people regardless of their belief systems. Founded in 2013, the Openly Secular coalition is led by four organizations - Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, and Stiefel Freethought Foundation. This campaign is also joined by national partner organizations from the secular movement as well as organizations that are allies to our cause.

The mission of Openly Secular is to eliminate discrimination and increase acceptance by getting secular people - including atheists, freethinkers, agnostics, humanists and nonreligious people - to be open about their beliefs.



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SHARED VALUES, DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES: A Guide for Clergy



WELCOME

People deconvert from religion for numerous reasons. Some are simply unable to reconcile the contradictions between theology and science. For others, witnessing or experiencing spiritual abuse and moral hypocrisy have made adhering to their beliefs too costly. While we acknowledge the difficulties of learning or has left their of your faith community is questioning or has left their religious affiliation altogether, we believe it's important for clergy to remain positive & supportive of both your secular congregant and/or their family. This brochure is intended to help clergy understand the realities of being open and provides some tools for keeping families and friendships intact.

BECOMING OPEN

While deciding to be open is an important step toward living an authentic and honest life, for many people it's a difficult decision to make. Choosing to keep a part of yourself private is perfectly valid, however, doing so out of necessity is problematic. The majority of secular people are aware of the negative ways they are perceived. Some choose to live openly while others view concealment as their only option. Despite the growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated adults, being fully open often incurs social costs, such as:

Types of Religious Anti-Secular Intolerance Experienced by Secular Individuals

- 🌀 Social Ostracism
- 🌀 Invalidation
- 🌀 Verbal Harassment
- 🌀 Stereotyping/Slander
- 🌀 Being "Outed"
- 🌀 Proselytization

The effects of discrimination stress that come from being part of an invisible minority and constant fear of being exposed increases psychological distress and diminishes well-being among those who aren't openly secular. Persistent exposure to intolerance can lead to long term physical and mental health problems, but acceptance and support from friends and family are key for reducing these risks.

Conflicts over beliefs are often seen as value-conflicts. This is a false assumption. Beliefs represent what we hold to be true. Values represent what we hold to be important. Being secular doesn't prohibit us from having the same values as people of faith - **but we may hold the same values for different reasons.**

LEADING BY EXAMPLE: DISPELLING SECULAR MYTHS

There are many overgeneralized stereotypes about religion that do not apply to all faith congregations. The same is true of nonbelief.

1. Secular people are just angry at god.

Secular people don't believe in a god, so they can't be mad at a god. Some secular people are angry about religion and what happens on account of certain religious doctrines or beliefs, but that is different from being angry at a god.

2. Secular people are arrogant.

Some secular people are arrogant. Some religious people are arrogant. The truth is that some people are arrogant. Most nontheists find the claims of religion unconvincing and are willing to calmly explain why. This is honesty, not arrogance.

3. Secular people love sinning too much to give it up.

Secular people, like religious people, generally want to do what is right and avoid doing what is wrong. However, nontheists may simply disagree with religious people about whether or not a particular act is wrong. This is why nontheists generally avoid stealing or bullying just like religious people do, but many nontheists don't believe homosexuality is immoral or sinful, and so do not treat it as such.

4. Secular people live empty, unfulfilled lives.

Secular people have lots of things in life that make them happy and fulfilled: friends, family, sports, love, helping make the world a better place, learning new things, etc. The list could go on and on, and in almost every place it overlaps with what makes religious people happy, too.

5. Secular people have no morals.

Secular people are typically just as moral as theists. Like theists, they derive their morals from many different areas including philosophy, role models, experience, family, etc. Typically the only disagreement is over the use of scripture and religious dogma as the basis of morality. Beyond that, secular and religious people can (and do) typically agree on many aspects of morality and what it means to be a good person.

COUNSELING RELIGIOUS FAMILIES

While disclosing may elicit **social and/or emotional crises** for secular individuals, those being disclosed to may also experience **spiritual and/or emotional crises**. In many cases, people seek pastoral counseling from their religious clergy.

Individuals on each side often find themselves at an impasse. While we understand the importance of faith in the lives of believers, it's important to understand that secular people don't adopt their beliefs haphazardly. And while it may be completely normal to encourage families in this situation to trust in a divine plan (and we're not discouraging the use of faith as a coping technique), the reality is that people who leave their faith and adopt secular beliefs rarely return as the prodigal son or daughter to their former faith. When families seek counsel about their secular loved ones, we encourage you to focus on the suggested messages listed below.

Suggested Messages for Religious Family/Friends of Secular Individuals

- 🌀 Love your secular relative/friend unconditionally
- 🌀 Don't excommunicate your secular loved one
- 🌀 Don't try to force what you believe on your secular loved one
- 🌀 Take their disclosure seriously
- 🌀 Don't try to change your secular loved one's mind
- 🌀 Don't argue scripture
- 🌀 Continue to live your life according to the tenets of your faith

"Do your best, hope for good things, but recognize that, if you are really fortunate, he or she will eventually do what is best for him- or herself." - Dr. Donald B. Ardel

Living openly secular is a journey. Like every journey, this one will have its ups and downs. It's important for families to know that they are not alone, they are not to blame, and should not feel guilty. Many families have taken this path, and with time, patience, and understanding, all parties involved - religious and secular alike - have found peace.

For more information on living openly secular or on becoming a religious Ally, visit: www.openlysecular.org

