

Atheism in America: A History

With
Neil Brownell, Ph.D.

Some Famous Nonbelievers:

What do these people have in common?



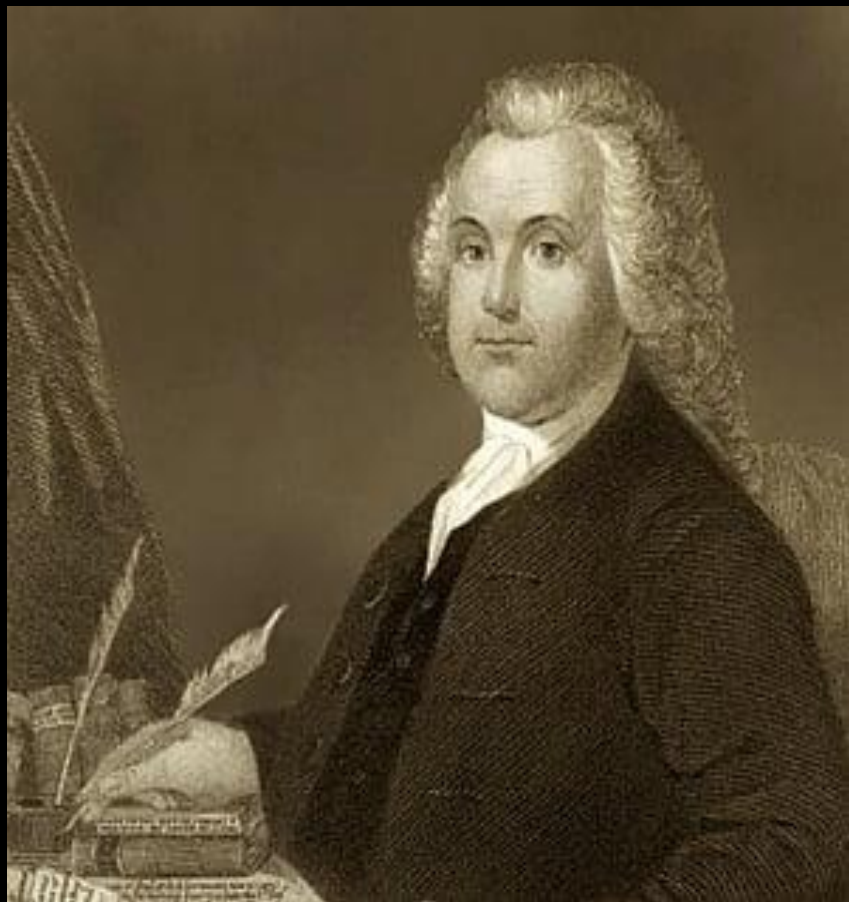
Definitions!

- “A-theism”: literally, ‘against god’; an absence or rejection of a belief in the existence of god. Not bound by any ideology.
- “Agnostic”: literally, ‘unknowing’; view that ultimate reality, including the existence of nonexistence of god, is unknowable.
- “Secular Humanism”: posits that humans are capable of being ethical without god, and that it is up to each individual to examine truth claims and take responsibility for own actions.

John Winthrop and “Puritan” Theocracies



Roger Williams and “ Religious Tolerance”



“A pagan or anti-Christian pilot may be as skillful to carry the ship to its desired port as any Christian mariner or pilot in the world, and may perform that work with as much safety and speed.”

“Enlightenment” Men:
‘Faith in the Light of Reason’

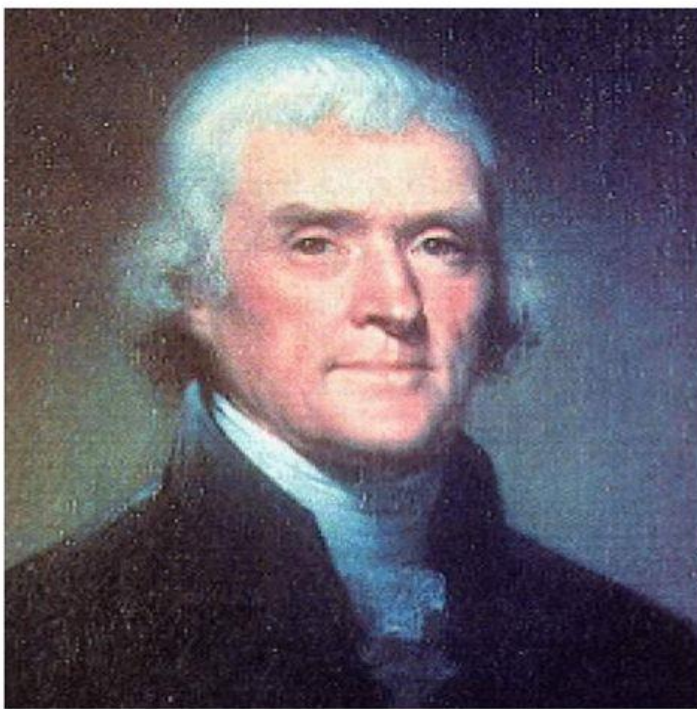
Thomas Jefferson

“It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither breaks my leg, nor picks my pocket.”

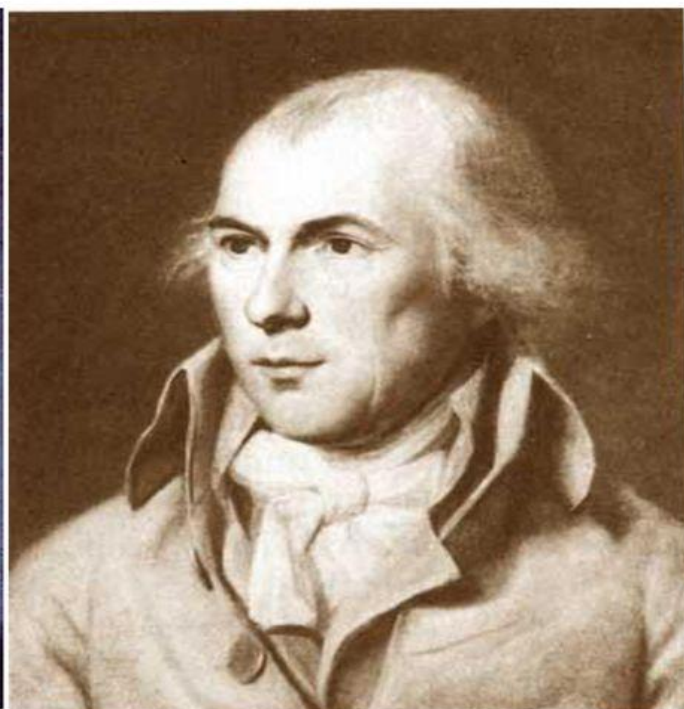
James Madison

“Before any man can be considered as a member of civil society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe.”

“Deists” Write Our Founding Documents



THOMAS JEFFERSON



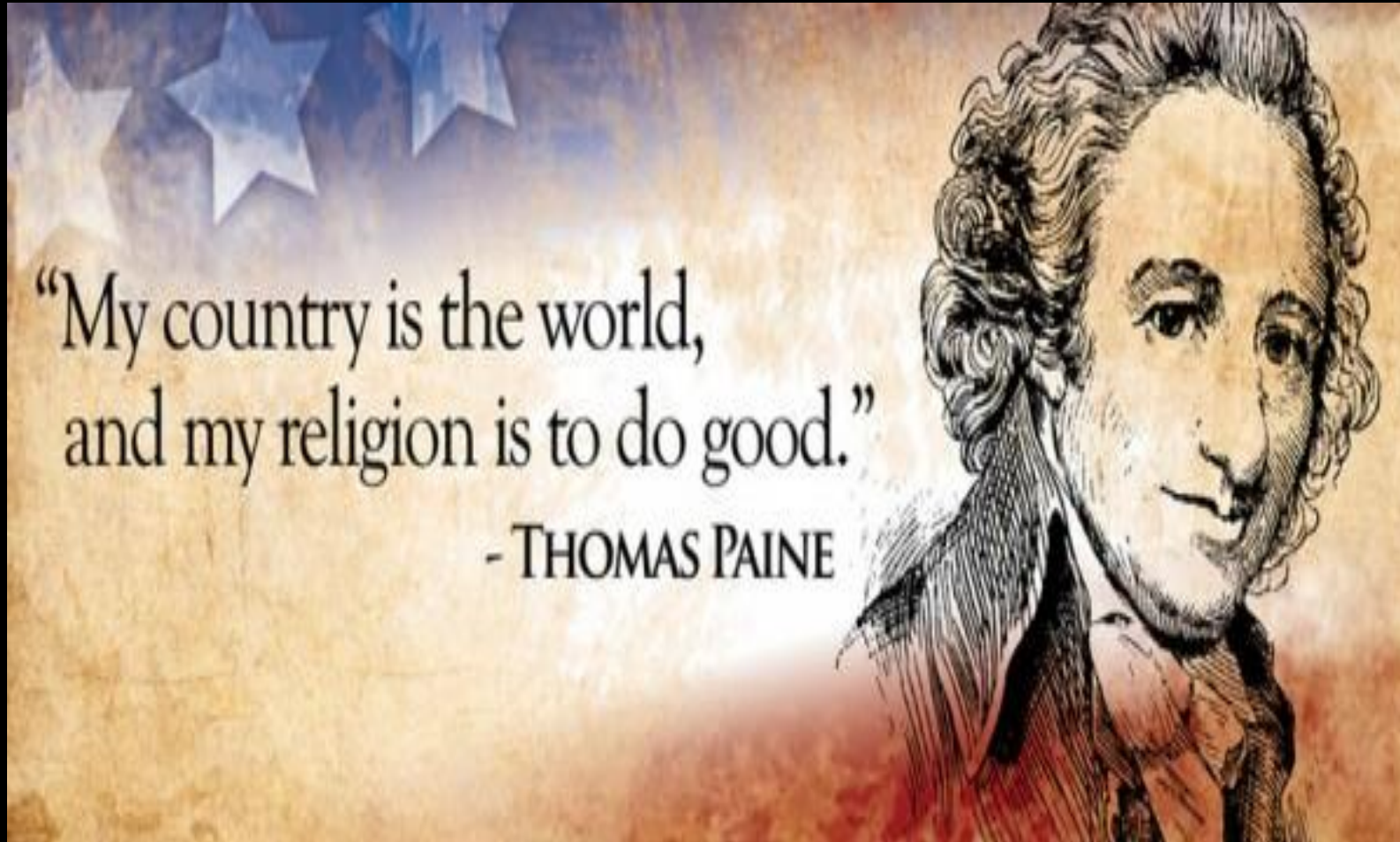
JAMES MADISON

The “godless” United States Constitution

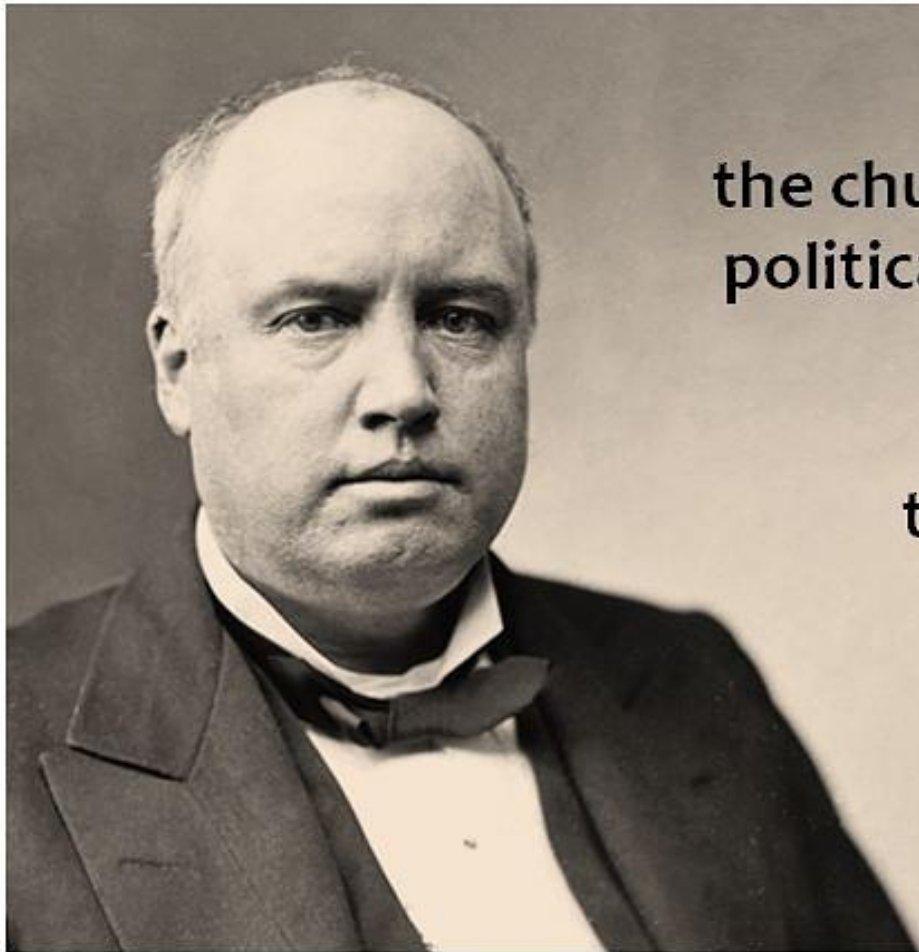
FREEDOM OF RELIGION GUARANTEES

- 1ST Amendment- “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”
- Article VI- “no religious test shall ever be required as a Qualification for any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

Revolutionary War hero until...his “Age of Reason”
challenged the “Second Great Awakening”



Robert Ingersoll: Atheist Superstar, mid 19th c



It probably will not be long until the churches will divide as sharply upon political, as upon theological questions; and when that day comes, if there are not liberals enough to hold the balance of power, this Government will be destroyed. The liberty of man is not safe in the hands of any church.

— Robert Green Ingersoll

19th Century Atheists challenge more than god: women's rights, abolition, living wages



The Bible and the Church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the way of women's emancipation.

-Elizabeth Cady-Stanton

The Haymarket “Riot” and Fears of Instability



George Santayana:

Mystical Atheism...or “Nonbelief”?



*In the contemplation of beauty we
are raised above ourselves, the
passions are silenced and we are
happy in the recognition of a good
that we do not seek to possess.*

First World War: Dissent and “Treason”



The “Cold War” in the 1950s: “Godless Soviets” and “Christian America”

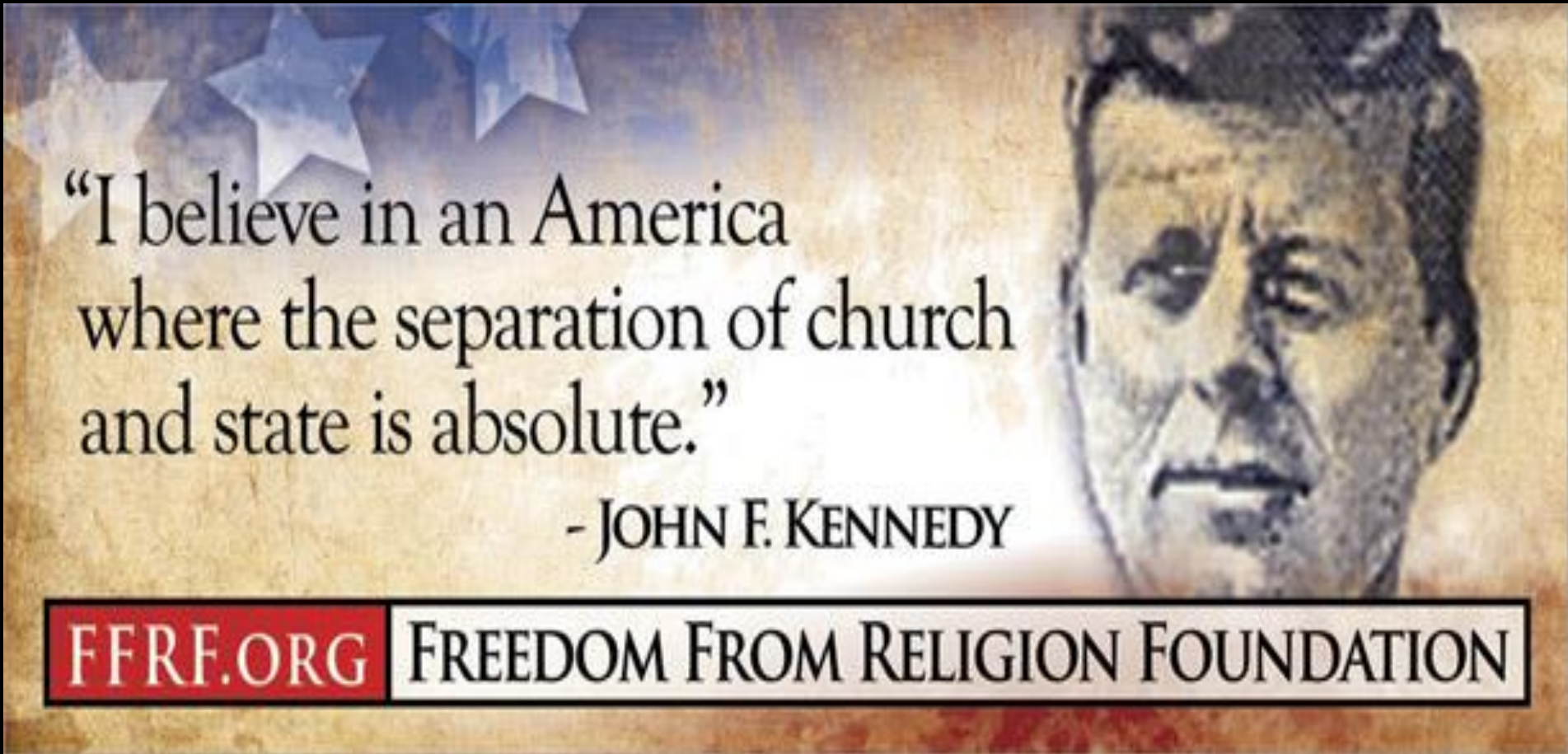
“From the root of atheism stems the evil weed of communism.”

Michigan Representative,
Luis Rabaut, speaking in the
U.S. Congress

Civic Insertions of “God”:

- Prayer room in Congress
- Prayer breakfast added to White House agenda
- “Under God” added to Pledge
- National motto “E Pluribus Unum” (Out of Many, One) changed to “In God We Trust”
- “In God We Trust” added to all forms of currency

Retreat from McCarthyism, our first Catholic President and the status of Nonbelievers, 1960s



“I believe in an America
where the separation of church
and state is absolute.”

- JOHN F. KENNEDY

FFRF.ORG

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION FOUNDATION

These challenges to god references led to new judicial language: “Ceremonial Deism”



Courts find references to “God” allowed because “nominally religious statements and practices [are] deemed to be merely ritual and non-religious through long customary usage.”

1962, Eugene Rostow,
Dean of Yale Law School

A Historic First! The International Religious Freedom Act adds nonbelief (2016)



An “Atheist Awakening”?

A “Non-theistic” Minister

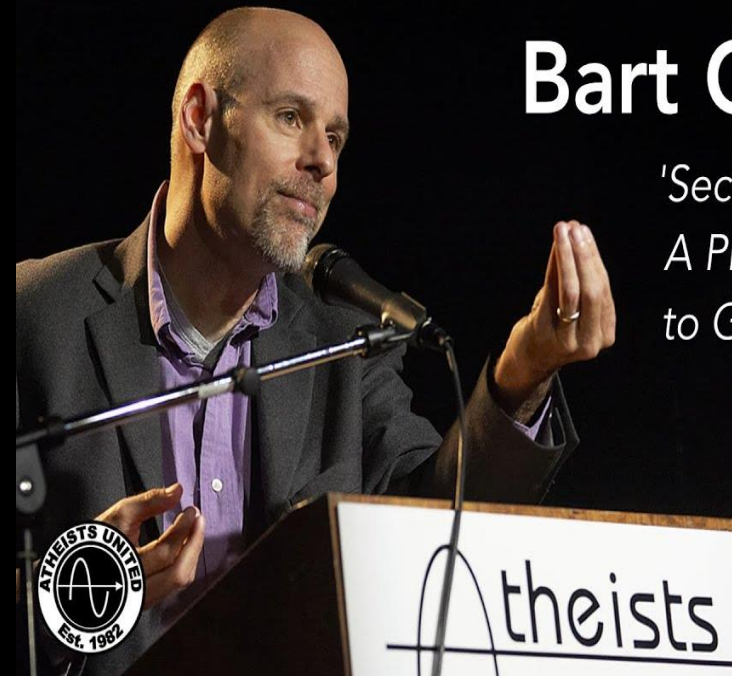
USC “Humanist” Chaplain and
“Atheist Evangelist”



Gretta Vosper:
atheist minister under fire



The Thinking Atheist
Radio Podcast #237
Show Date: 9-8-15

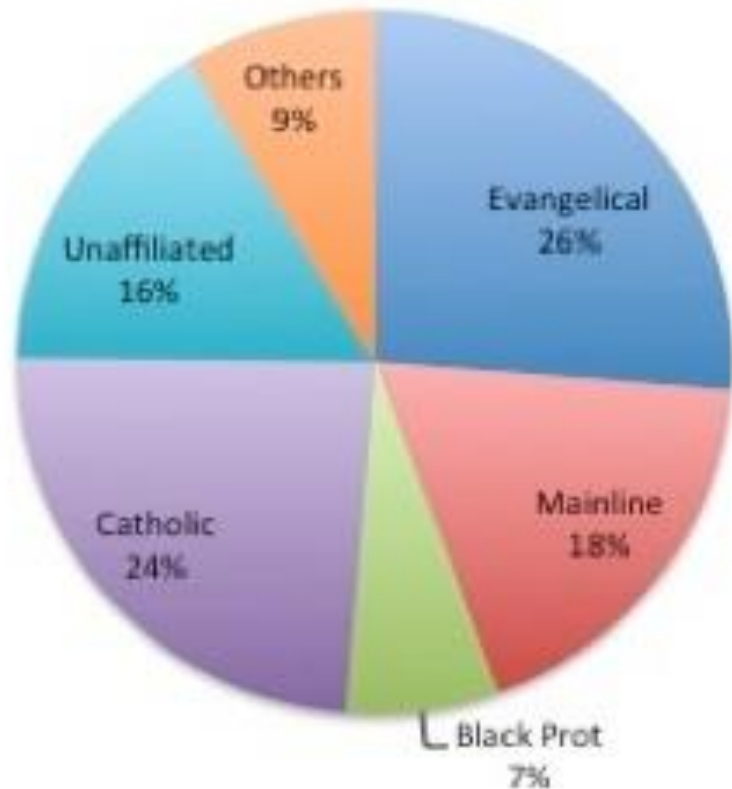


Bart Campolo

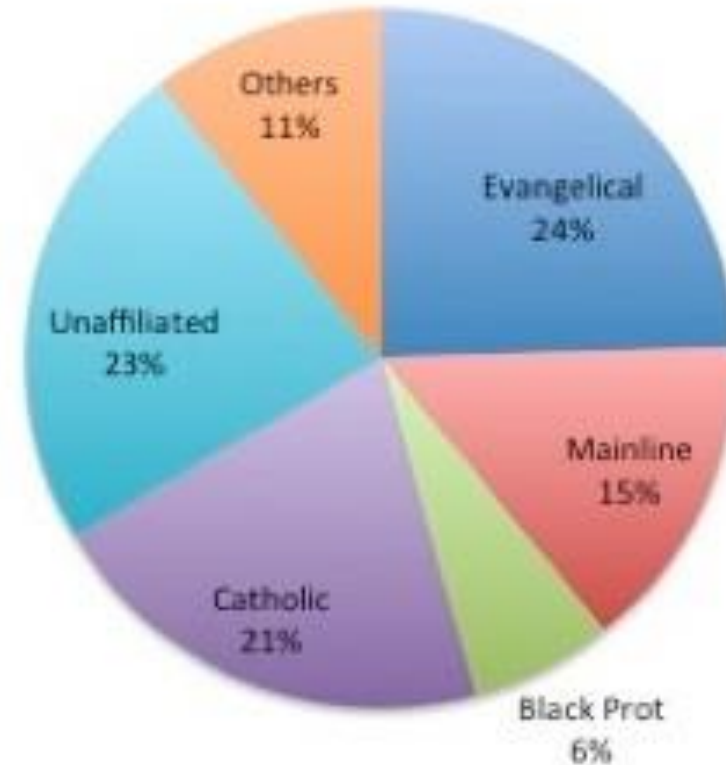
*'Secular Humanism:
A Proactive Approach
to Goodness'*

Rapid Changes from 2007!!

Pew Religious Landscape 2007



Pew Religious Landscape 2014



Glimpses of the Future: the Class of 2019

Question: Which of the following religions do you observe or practice, if any?

