

LIVING OPENLY SECULAR

A **secular** person is someone who does not believe in a higher power or supreme being. There are multiple labels that secular persons can adopt that best describe their nonreligious beliefs. An **atheist** is someone who does not believe in any gods. An **agnostic** either sees the existence of god or gods as unknowable, or makes no individual claim to know the answer. **Freethinkers** and **skeptics** see science and reason as more dependable than religious doctrine and revelation. Humanism is a nontheistic philosophy that focuses on improving the human condition. Only the natural world warrants consideration for **naturalists** (as opposed to the supernatural), and empirical evidence is the core of their worldview.

Despite the large and growing numbers of religiously unaffiliated adults, living openly secular often incurs a range of social costs.

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

49%
of Christians
would be
unhappy if a
family member
married an
atheist. §

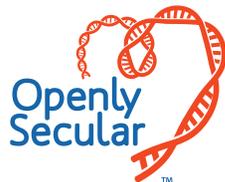
Choosing to keep a part of yourself private is perfectly valid, however, doing so out of necessity is problematic. The effects of discrimination stress that come from being part of an invisible minority and constant fear of being exposed increases psychological distress and diminishes well-being among 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.

§ **Pew Research Center.** Full report available at: pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/16/so-you-married-an-atheist

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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Special thanks to PFLAG, www.pflag.org, for allowing us to adapt pieces of the *Opening the Straight Spouse's Closet: A Guide for Understanding Issues Facing Families with GLBT Spouses* for this text.

**For Spouses and Partners:
Understanding Your Secular Significant Other.
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**FOR SPOUSES
& PARTNERS:
Understanding Your
Secular Significant Other**

WELCOME

If you are reading this brochure, you probably just learned that your significant other is secular. It is important to know that, in opening up to you, your spouse/partner identifies you as someone who matters to them, and has made an important step on their journey towards living openly and honestly. This brochure helps religious spouses/partners understand and respond to their secular significant other. While we acknowledge the difficulties of learning that your loved one is questioning religious beliefs or has lost faith altogether, we believe it is important for religious spouses/partners to refrain from reacting harshly, responding negatively, and labeling their significant others.

A MESSAGE TO RELIGIOUS SPOUSES/PARTNERS

“My Husband Doesn’t Share My Faith”

Barry and I met and married 28 years ago. It was a spur-of-the-moment thing: He liked my then-red hair and green eyes; I liked his broad shoulders and sense of humor. Plus, he was easy to talk to. As unbelievers, neither of us had a clue what our future would be. We just thought a life together would be a kick. A relationship with Christ was the last thing on our minds!

Our first three years of marriage were filled with partying, softball, and the birth of our first daughter. Then, almost without warning, God drew me into a relationship with himself...Then one day after a long talk with Rita, one of my coworkers, I prayed a simple prayer: “Jesus save me!” That prayer forever changed my life—and my marriage as I knew it.

The way I see it, God has a plan for each life. And no matter how hard I try, I cannot transform someone else’s heart. I can’t coerce, sweet-talk, or plead my husband into being a Christian. In fact, when I do try, it only drives him away—sometimes literally. If I start nagging him, he’ll get in his truck and drive for hours.

I decided long ago to accept that it’s God’s job to change hearts. That decision frees me to pursue my relationship with God without the added burden of having to bring my husband to faith. All I have to do is love and enjoy him. That’s God’s plan for me, and he gives me all the grace I need to accomplish it.

Written by Nancy Kennedy. Full article available at: www.powertochange.com/experience/sex-love/husbandsfaith

THEY LOVE ME... THEY LOVE ME NOT?

“I still didn’t know what atheism meant for me, but I couldn’t not share it. I didn’t want to not share it with my wife. I wanted her to go through it with me. I wanted her to be there for me to talk to.” – Andrew

Religious spouses/partners are often unprepared to hear that their significant other is secular. Remember that when your spouse/partner discloses their secular beliefs they may still be struggling to come to terms with this change.

You may feel like your significant other’s loss of faith violates your marriage vows. Or perhaps you’re questioning if the relationship can continue, and if so, what compromises might need to be made. These are normal reactions. Getting past the initial disclosure requires compassion and patience on both sides. Many people immediately fear the worst – that everything has changed. Sometimes this is the case, but often it is not. It is entirely appropriate for you to ask for reassurance regarding the foreseeable future of your relationship.

Tips for Religious Spouses/Partners

Live in the now. Don’t continue to look back, thinking “What if?”, and don’t wait for “happily-ever-after” to appear. Instead, accept things as they are, building on what’s good in your relationship, and pray/meditate on what’s not so good.

Live your truth. Continue living out your faith. In doing so, let your loved one see your triumphs and challenges. Let them see your stumbles and struggles. Continue to attend church as often as you prefer.

Honor your marriage/partnership. Simply love your secular partner/spouse. Don’t talk negatively about them. Show your love by fostering mutual respect. Rather than creating discord by focusing on areas of contention, cultivate common interests, beliefs, and values.

Remember humility. Keep awareness of this quality at the fore of your mind when relating to your secular loved one. Avoid becoming strident - don’t preach or lecture, or tell them what, how, and who they should be.

Find a support system. Surround yourself with friends and family who will pray with and for you, or otherwise provide the type of solace you prefer.

MOVING FORWARD TOGETHER

“I knew she wouldn’t be happy, but I was very content to say to her, ‘If there’s anything that I know, it’s that I wanted to be married to you for the rest of my life. My feelings and commitment towards you are no different now than they were three days ago, nor do I ever want them to be different.’” – Adam

Remember that as difficult as this is for you, opening up to you was likely not easy for your loved one. Your significant other’s rejection of religious beliefs is not a rejection of your love or their commitment to you.

Some secular-religious relationships are unable to survive, due to numerous reasons that can stem from either partner. However, if your secular partner can affirm that they have not radically changed, and continue to hold most of the same values and priorities prior to leaving faith, and both of you are willing to show one another mutual respect, maintaining your secular-religious relationship is entirely possible. Many families come to a place of healing and acceptance over time.

Couples who choose to stay together encounter many obstacles such as relearning how to communicate, negotiating religious participation, agreeing on the role of religion in parenting, and navigating relationships with religious parents/family members.

It’s important to remember that you and your secular loved one are on a journey. Like every journey, this one will have its ups and downs, but know that many relationships have taken this path and arrived in a place that is better than where they started. The important thing is that you and your secular partner/spouse are working towards understanding.



For more information on how support your spouse/partner and the larger secular community in general, visit:
www.openlysecular.org/toolkits