

# What Is a Nontheistic Student?

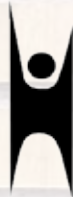
This brochure is intended to help educators properly understand and support students who have decided to use a nontheistic label for themselves. **We believe that it is important for adults to refrain from labeling children.**

A nontheist is an individual who does not believe in a higher power or supreme being. A nontheist might choose one or more of many labels. Common terms include atheist, agnostic, freethinker, skeptic, Humanist, secularist, naturalist or bright.



**A** **atheist** is someone who does not believe in any gods. An **agnostic** either sees the existence of a 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 which focuses on improving the human condition. **Secularists** emphasize a secular society and approach to their lives. For **naturalists** and **brights**, only the natural world (as opposed to the supernatural – deities, ghosts, etc.) warrants consideration, and empirical evidence is at the core of their naturalistic worldviews.



Many nontheists also use satirical labels such as **Pastafarian**, a fan of the parody religion “The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.”

Learn more at [www.secularstudents.org/educators](http://www.secularstudents.org/educators).



# About the Secular Student Alliance

If you have questions or concerns about nontheistic students in your school, please contact the Secular Student Alliance for assistance. Our high school specialist is available to answer questions, provide advice on harassment or discrimination cases, help start a nontheistic student group, and more.

The underlying purpose of the Secular Student Alliance is to bring about a society in which the ideals of critical thinking and scientific inquiry, secularism, democracy and human-based ethics flourish. Whereas many organizations already exist to spread these values to adult populations, the SSA focuses on fostering them among high school and college students.

**Our mission is to organize, unite, educate and serve students and student communities that promote the ideals of scientific rationality, secularism, democracy, and human-based ethics.**

We are a 501(c)(3) educational non-profit organization based in Columbus, Ohio.

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Use this QR code to access our educators' resources at [www.secularstudents.org/educators](http://www.secularstudents.org/educators)

All photos courtesy of Camp Quest: [www.campquest.org](http://www.campquest.org)

# Nontheistic Students In Your School



**An Educator's Guide to Atheists, Humanists and Other Nontheistic Students**



[www.secularstudents.org/educators](http://www.secularstudents.org/educators)

# Dispelling Myths

There are many common misconceptions about nontheists. Educators play an important role in correcting these fallacies which are often presented in our culture and the media. Schools are in a unique position to educate in ways that put an end to many of these myths.

For example, it is commonly believed that someone without a belief in a god cannot have a moral compass or find purpose in his or her life. However, **there is no evidence that a lack of belief in a higher power leads to immoral behavior**, nor that such a worldview results in unhappiness.

Recent research...shows that many students who identify as atheist or related designations, such as humanist or free thinker are, in fact, quite thoughtful about their purpose, morals, and values...They state that their life purpose is to use their skills and talents in service to the environment, humanity, and all living creatures. Their purpose and morality are less about personal salvation after death and more about celebrating and contributing to the human condition.

- Kathleen M. Goodman and John A. Mueller, "Atheists on Campus: From Misconceptions to Inclusion," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 30 Jan, 2009.

Another misconception is that nontheists wish to convert others to their views or redesign society. In reality, most nontheists, and especially nontheistic students, **simply want to be accepted for who they are**. Reshaping society or converting others is rarely a priority.

Nontheists are practically invisible in our society, having no visible trait that sets them apart from the majority (compared to racial minorities or nonnative English speakers, for example). This often leads to the assumption that there are only a few stray individuals who do not believe in a god or gods. However, **the percentage of youth who do not identify with any religion is growing rapidly**: recent studies indicate that about 10% of 18-25-year-olds are nontheistic, and an additional 10% have rejected organized religion.

# A Stark Reality

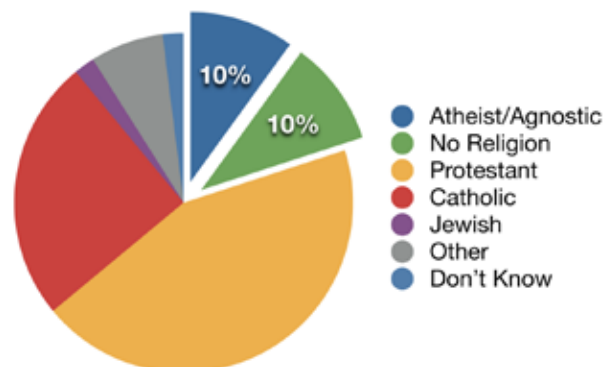
Despite the large and growing numbers of nontheists, the unfortunate truth is that **they face real discrimination**.

A 2007 Gallup poll indicated that over half of the American population would not vote for an atheist for president, and a recent study by the University of Minnesota showed that among atheists, Muslims, homosexuals, conservative Christians, recent immigrants, Hispanics, Jews, Asian-Americans, African-Americans and white Americans, **atheists are the most distrusted group in the USA**.

Nontheists are **banned from many cultural and ethnic organizations**, including the Boy Scouts of America. Military personnel without a belief in a higher power have faced exclusion and proselytizing from their officers, and may be denied promotions. **Six state constitutions require elected officials to affirm belief in a supreme being**, in direct conflict with the U.S. Constitution's prohibition against religious tests for public office.

Nontheistic students' views are often dismissed. Furthermore, **many students are faced with a daily social and moral dilemma** at common school functions. The Pledge of Allegiance, sports team prayers, and commencement invocations may compel them either to participate in activities contrary to their beliefs, or face possible social stigma or administrative punishment for not participating.

## "Generation Next" Religious Identification



Data compiled from multiple sources.  
See [www.secularstudents.org/educators](http://www.secularstudents.org/educators) for details.

# How You Can Help

Teachers, school officials and administrators bear a legal and moral obligation to safeguard the well-being of nontheistic students. **All students are entitled to be treated with respect** in a public school environment, regardless of their beliefs.

A first step for educators is to **learn more about the spectrum of secular outlooks** one may encounter in nontheistic students. As you learn more, you will become aware of both the pervasiveness of misconceptions and also ways to counter those stereotypes. Several sources of information are available through the Secular Student Alliance educators' website at [www.secularstudents.org/educators](http://www.secularstudents.org/educators).

Staff and administrators should also **create a welcoming environment for nontheistic students**. Provide information in the form of brochures, library books or knowledgeable staff to help all students as they develop their own worldviews. When religion or worldview topics are discussed, don't shy away from speaking openly about nontheism – **silence can imply a taboo**. Remain alert for instances of **harassment or bullying** and **make it clear that such behavior is unacceptable**, enforcing the same discipline as would be applied in any other case of harassment.

**Discrimination against nontheistic student groups in public schools is illegal**. Secular student groups have the same rights, protections and accommodations as any other extra-curricular clubs.

**The Secular Student Alliance is happy to assist you and your students in forming a nontheist group at your school**. This can serve as a community for students who feel they must hide this aspect of their identity in other social settings, and such a group provides a "safe haven" for students who may face harassment or social difficulties due to their beliefs.

Contact our High School Specialist with any questions!

