



# Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions

By Phil Zuckerman

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**Living the Secular Life: New Answers to Old Questions** By Phil Zuckerman

**“A humane and sensible guide to and for the many kinds of Americans leading secular lives in what remains one of the most religious nations in the developed world.” —The New York Times Book Review**

Over the last twenty-five years, “no religion” has become the fastest-growing religious preference in the United States. Around the world, hundreds of millions of people have turned away from the traditional faiths of the past and embraced a moral yet nonreligious—or secular—life, generating societies vastly less religious than at any other time in human history. Revealing the inspiring beliefs that empower secular culture—alongside real stories of nonreligious men and women based on extensive in-depth interviews from across the country—*Living the Secular Life* will be indispensable for millions of secular Americans.

Drawing on innovative sociological research, *Living the Secular Life* illuminates this demographic shift with the moral convictions that govern secular individuals, offering crucial information for the religious and nonreligious alike. *Living the Secular Life* reveals that, despite opinions to the contrary, nonreligious Americans possess a unique moral code that allows them to effectively navigate the complexities of modern life. Spiritual self-reliance, clear-eyed pragmatism, and an abiding faith in the Golden Rule to adjudicate moral decisions: these common principles are shared across secular society. *Living the Secular Life* demonstrates these principles in action and points to their usage throughout daily life.

Phil Zuckerman is a sociology professor at Pitzer College, where he studied the lives of the nonreligious for years before founding a Department of Secular Studies, the first academic program in the nation dedicated to exclusively studying secular culture and the sociological consequences of America’s fastest-growing “faith.” Zuckerman discovered that despite the entrenched negative beliefs about nonreligious people, American secular culture is grounded in deep morality and proactive citizenship—indeed, some of the very best that the country has to offer.

*Living the Secular Life* journeys through some of the most essential components

of human existence—child rearing and morality, death and ritual, community and beauty—and offers secular readers inspiration for leading their own lives. Zuckerman shares eye-opening research that reveals the enduring moral strength of children raised without religion, as well as the hardships experienced by secular mothers in the rural South, where church attendance defines the public space. Despite the real sorrows of mortality, Zuckerman conveys the deep psychological health of secular individuals in their attitudes toward illness, death, and dying. Tracking the efforts of nonreligious groups to construct their own communities, Zuckerman shows how Americans are building institutions and cultivating relationships without religious influence. Most of all, *Living the Secular Life* infuses the sociological data and groundbreaking research with the moral convictions that govern secular individuals and demonstrates how readers can integrate these beliefs into their own lives.

A manifesto for a booming social movement—and a revelatory survey of this overlooked community—*Living the Secular Life* offers essential and long-awaited information for anyone building a life based on his or her own principles.

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## Editorial Review

Review

### A Best Book of 2014, *Publishers Weekly*:

"Zuckerman is a sociologist who in this **groundbreaking** book writes clearly, offers unobtrusive statistical support, and provides a **persuasive and comprehensive** look at the growing contemporary phenomenon of people who choose to live without religion, but with ethics and meaning in their lives."

### *Library Journal*:

**"The author brilliantly weaves stories and reflections together with empirical sociological research to create a rich portrait of secular America... Highly recommended for all readers,** both religious and nonreligious, seeking a more accurate understanding of this ever-growing segment of the American population."

### *Publishers Weekly*:

"In this **fascinating** work, Zuckerman (*Faith No More: Why People Reject Religion*), professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College, explores the moral and ethical foundations of secularism, addressing the question of whether you can live a good life without God or religion. Anecdotal evidence abounds; interviews with former religious adherents who have moved into secularism, both within and outside their religious communities, offer a **compelling argument for the non-necessity of God in the pursuit of a moral life.** "

### *Booklist*:

"With recent polls reporting 30 percent of Americans are nonreligious, while other studies find atheists the least-trusted people in the country, **isn't it high time to blow away the myths about the nonreligious?** Answering affirmatively, the sociologist founder of the first secular-studies program at Pitzer College presents real secular people as peaceable, productive, and living happily....He also shows that secularism isn't bipolar—believer or nonbeliever—but includes many with some supernatural beliefs but who aren't religiously observant. And there's not a proselytizer or zealot among this group—the point being that secular people are not all—indeed, hardly ever—Christopher Hitchens or Madalyn Murray O'Hair. May one more prejudice fall."

### **Greg M. Epstein, humanist chaplain at Harvard University; author *Good Without God***

"Phil Zuckerman is without a doubt the leading American sociologist of secularism. And with America secularizing more rapidly and profoundly now than in any previous era in our history, **Zuckerman's work has become essential reading for everyday people who want to understand religion—and the nonreligious—in this country.** *Living the Secular Life* represents the next big chapter in a centuries-old story, so **if you've ever taken an interest in Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, et al., you certainly need to pick this book up and find out where things are headed.**"

### **Bart Campolo, author *Things We Wish We Had Said***

"Since coming out as a post-Christian minister, I've discovered all kinds of people sincerely pursuing goodness without the nurture, encouragement, and mutual support most church folks take for granted. These folks are hungry for fellowship and pastoral care, but even hungrier for a thoughtful, positive way to communicate their values and commitments to friends and family members instinctively distrustful of anyone who doesn't believe in God. For them—and for me—**Phil Zuckerman is a genuine hero, and**

***Living the Secular Life* is a wonderful gift. Here at last is a clear, concise, and compassionate guided tour of the world's fastest-growing way of life.** Zuckerman isn't trying to prove everyone else wrong. On the contrary, he's helping the secular community better understand and comport itself, and helping the rest of humanity understand that we're on their side too."

**Peter Boghossian, professor of philosophy, Portland State University; author of *A Manual for Creating Atheists***

"For secular people seeking deeper insight into their own worldview, or religious people seeking to better understand the rise of irreligion in society today, **this book is indispensable. An engaging, powerful read.**"

About the Author

**Phil Zuckerman** is a professor of sociology and secular studies at Pitzer College in Claremont, California. He is the author most recently of *Faith No More* and *Society without God*, and he blogs for *Psychology Today* and the *Huffington Post*.

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Introduction

And there it was again: the whole notion of "nothing." It came at me twice in the same week, and from two different people.

The first time it came up was with Jill. We were standing and talking on the curb outside the studio where her son and my son both take cello lessons. Jill is in her early forties, from San Francisco, and she recently sold her modern furniture store in order to be at home more with her kids. We often chitchat when cello lessons are over and our sons are busy playing in the nearby bushes.

The other day as we were talking, religion came up. That was when Jill expressed what I've heard so many times before: "I just don't want my kids to be 'nothing.'"

Jill is one of tens of millions of Americans who are nonreligious. Her mom was Buddhist and her dad was Catholic, and she was raised with a fair amount of both traditions. But by the time she got to college, she knew that she didn't believe in God. Sure, maybe there's something more out there—who can say? But religion just wasn't her thing. Her husband felt the same way. And all was fine for several years.

But lately, with her kids being three and six, things have somehow started to feel different. Jill is a little worried. She told me that she was considering sending her kids to some church, perhaps the local Catholic church. But I could tell that she was conflicted. When I asked her why she was contemplating sending her kids to church if she didn't feel 100 percent about it, she said, "I want them to get some morals. I think that's important."

"But your children can develop a healthy, durable morality without religion," I replied.

"Yeah, I guess you're right. But still . . ."

Being a secular parent myself, and having studied the hills and dales of secular culture for some time now, I know what gnaws at Jill. I'm quite familiar with the angst that many such secular Americans experience: the feeling that maybe one is making a mistake by raising one's kids without religion. Even though Jill is living a meaningful, thoughtful, and ethical life without religious faith or affiliation, she nonetheless feels that if she doesn't impart some sort of religious identity to her kids—if they lack religious involvement—then they will be . . . *nothing*.

Oh, and immoral to boot.

## **Users Review**

### **From reader reviews:**

#### **Kevin Santiago:**

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#### **Mary James:**

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#### **Robert Jackson:**

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