

HOW TO DEFEAT

RELIGION

*IN 10
EASY
STEPS*

A Toolkit for Secular Activists

RYAN T. CRAGUN



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in 10 Easy Steps

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Ryan T. Cragun

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CONTENTS

Introduction	7
Step 1: Promote and Defend Secular Education	15
Step 2: Empower Gender, Sexual, and Racial Minorities	31
Step 3: Provide “This Life” Security	49
Step 4: Encourage Sexual Liberation for Everyone	61
Step 5: Stop Subsidizing Religion and Deregulate It	70
Step 6: Encourage Regulated Capitalism	83
Step 7: Support Education, Art, and Science	94
Step 8: Syncretize Holidays and Rituals	102
Step 9: Change Society to Value Critical Thinking and Scientific Inquiry	117
Step 10: Teach Humanist Ethics in School	131
Conclusion	142
Notes	146
Bibliography	172
About the Author	200

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INTRODUCTION

You know what the worst part about defeating religion is?

There are no losers.

I want to defeat religion.

What do I mean by “defeat”? I want to shrink religion—really fundamentalist religion—to the point that it is marginalized in U.S. society. I want to make religious fundamentalists the new flat-earthers—they should be so disliked that they run to the furthest reaches of America to hide. Religious fundamentalists should be so unpopular that politicians avoid them, rather than pander to them and turn to them for endorsements. Religion will be defeated when U.S. politicians refuse their endorsements and stop intoning the pandering platitude, “And may God bless the United States of America.” Religion will be defeated when the media considers fundamentalists so extreme that they are cut off and provided no platform to voice their views and instead are targeted for ridicule. Religion will be defeated when people are too embarrassed to admit in public that they believe the earth is

8 • INTRODUCTION

6,000 years old. Religion will be defeated when no one tries to convert anyone else to his or her supernatural belief system. When the last strands of legitimacy religious fundamentalists have in society have been severed, religion will have been defeated. I don't imagine all religion will ever be gone, but I'll keep fighting religion until it has very little influence on politics, widespread social values, the media, science, sexuality, economics, charity, education, gender relations, and even federal holidays.

I'm actually not opposed to liberal religion, which tends to be accepting of science and modern human values. If people still find value in believing in things that cannot be proven to be true but also cannot be proven to be false, that's fine. Many people who try very hard to base their decisions on scientific findings, critical thinking, and logic still hold some beliefs that cannot be proven true or false (e.g., that someone loves them), and that will likely always be the case. But I am opposed to fundamentalist religion, religion that accepts scripture as literal, that rejects scientific findings that run counter to scripture, and that views the world as wholly black and white or good and evil. Fundamentalist religion is the type of religion I'd like to see defeated.

That religion could hypothetically be defeated without a calamitous collapse of society illustrates an important and very noteworthy characteristic of religion: religion is *not* necessary for society. Sociologists have been studying religion for over 150 years, and one of the earliest conceptualizations of religion was in terms of its functions for society. Religion can serve any or all of the following functions: to teach morality, to justify the right of the leaders of the society to rule, to justify oppression,

and to reinforce group boundaries, among others. However, religion is not required for any of these functions. Morality can be based in secular philosophy. The right to lead can be based on an implicit or explicit social contract. Oppression has also been justified on racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual lines (though, of course, it shouldn't be justified or even exist). And there are plenty of groups to which one can belong that can reinforce group boundaries. Regardless of the functions of religion for society historically, there is no reason to believe religion is, today, necessary for society. And this isn't just an exercise in theory; there are a number of countries where religion is so substantially diminished in both existence and importance that it may as well be nonexistent (e.g., Estonia, Hungary, China, Vietnam, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, etc.). In short, from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, religion can be argued to be unnecessary for society.

Since religion is *not* necessary, you might then wonder, is religion desirable? I have mixed feelings on this one, since there are some reasons to think that religion is not a universally negative phenomenon. As a skeptical atheist and secular humanist, I directly benefit from religion in only one way: it is the primary focus of my research and therefore helps to justify the existence of my job. But if religion were defeated, I would have no problem changing the focus of my research to some other sociological phenomenon. Thus, for me, personally, religion is not desirable. Certainly others see religion as desirable and many people believe that religion is a net positive for the world. That is a complicated assertion that can, with great difficulty, be evaluated (though there is inherent subjectivity in doing so). I have attempted to do

10 • INTRODUCTION

just that in a previous book, *What You Don't Know about Religion (but Should)*. In that book I found that, depending on the characteristics one desires in people and society, fundamentalist religion is absolutely not beneficial for humanity. However, I also concluded that certain forms of religion—liberal, nonliteralistic, modern, and egalitarian versions of religion—are not particularly harmful to society and may, in some ways, be beneficial. If someone wants to be religious today, liberal religion is the least harmful way to be so. This suggests, then, that religion is not necessary and fundamentalist religion is definitely not desirable. If one were to recognize that religion is not necessary and also believe that religion is not desirable, *what could one do to bring about its defeat?*

This question occurred to me on my way to a conference about—of all things—religion! In the fall of 2012, I was on a plane traveling to the annual meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion. I was reading the feature article in an issue of *Wired* magazine about “apocalypses” or threats that might dramatically change the entire world. The article, quite cogently, illustrated that these apocalypses were extremely unlikely. The “end of the world” rhetoric must have triggered something in my brain, which is often ruminating on religion. The thought that flashed into my mind was, “Could social science be used to defeat religion?” That was almost immediately followed by my own counter argument, “Well, yes, but why would you want to even consider that? You don’t believe all religion is bad.” But I couldn’t get the thought out of my head. So, I reframed it to make it more palatable. “*Hypothetically*, if I wanted to defeat religion and had the

power and influence to substantially change the necessary aspects of the social world, how would I go about it?" A variety of "steps" or changes to society came to mind. Those steps form the chapters of this book.

When I counted the steps and realized I had assembled ten, I couldn't help but think of another famous ten-step plan. I am referring, of course, to the ten-step plan of the revolutionary social theorist Karl Marx (with Friedrich Engels), who outlined ten steps to convert a capitalist economic system and government into a communist one. I have a great deal of respect for Marx as a social theorist, but my hypothetical steps aren't nearly as lofty in their aim as were his. He wanted to change the economy. My hypothetical steps would be geared toward defeating an already weakening element of society—religion.

As I thought about the ten steps, and a possible title for the book, I ultimately decided on *How to Defeat Religion in 10 Easy Steps*. The title is very much meant to be a juxtaposition that grabs people's attention. There are thousands of books that talk about how to lose weight or improve your sex life in a specified number of steps (3, 5, and 10 seem to be particularly popular). The idea, of course, is that it's simple—follow the steps and the end result will be what the author promises. Well, I'm not going to make any promises, but the social scientific evidence suggests that the ten steps I have outlined in this book could significantly undermine the strength and vitality of religion. So, the plan I outline should work, but I'm not including a money-back guarantee!

If you're reading this book, you are probably a secular activist, meaning you advocate for the separation of church

12 • INTRODUCTION

and state, for government policies based on science and reason, and for the normalization of irreligion within society. You also likely self-identify as a humanist, atheist, agnostic, or freethinker, or some combination of these terms. If you don't, you're probably reading this trying to figure out what secular activists are planning (sneaky you!). Either way, I suspect most readers are invested either in trying to get people to leave religion or in trying to keep people from leaving religion. This may also mean you've been involved in debates or discussions in which one person has tried to change the religious/irreligious position of another. Debating or arguing over religion is not a very effective way to get someone to change his or her position. Why? Because, when people are attacked, their immediate response is to defend. There is a lot of research on how people do this when it comes to political views, but not as much with religious views. Debating religion with religious people has a tendency to reinforce existing beliefs: nonbelievers are typically confident they have shown the believer's beliefs are wrong while the believer either feels the opposite or draws upon his or her trump card: faith. The end result is that no one changes his or her views. Because debating religion is so ineffectual, at no point in this book do I recommend that secular activists debate the religious about religion. In fact, such debates probably do more to strengthen religion than weaken it as it makes it seem as though religious people have a credible defense for their beliefs. In a sense, it gives religious belief legitimacy, especially if the religious can get experts to debate them.

If we want to defeat religion, we have to do it *without* the religious realizing what we are doing. Religion is part of culture.

Because culture literally is how people view the world, trying to directly change someone's culture is nigh impossible. Think about it this way: How would you respond if someone came up to you and said, "Hi. I don't like how you view the world. Would you mind if I rewired your brain so you perceived the world the way I do?" If you're like me, you'd probably tell them to take a hike. If we want to succeed in defeating religion, we have to weaken religion around the religious.

Changing a culture slowly, concertedly, and with purpose can be done. My aim here is to illustrate how secular activists can subtly and effectively remove religion from a culture such that, when the religious realize what is happening, they will: (1) not be able to do anything about it and (2) already be so nonreligious that they won't want to fight what is happening.

I need to clarify an important issue before I move on to the ten steps: what I mean by religion. Religion is collective beliefs (and often rituals) relative to the supernatural. There are two key components in this definition. The first is that the beliefs and rituals have to be "collective." If just one person believes he is Jesus, he's insane. But if someone believes she is Jesus and has convinced 10,000 other people she is, then she has a religion (she may still be insane, but, for some reason, we don't typically consider socially constructed, *shared* "realities" insanity). So, religious beliefs or rituals have to be collective. The second key component of the definition is that these are beliefs or rituals that are relative to the supernatural. "Supernatural" refers to things that are outside the empirically verifiable natural world, like ghosts, demons, deities, and spirits. This definition includes the primary institutions and entities we think of as religions today, including Christianity,