

Organized Antireligion Move Fades

By GEORGE W. CORNELL
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Things are quiet today in the atheist camp. Its ranks are scattered. "To tell the truth, we aren't very active anymore," said Charles Smith, long-time president of the American Assn. for the Advancement of Atheism.

As an organized movement, antireligion in the United States has dwindled to a mere skeleton of its one-time robust dimensions.

Local branches have died out. The so-called "Damned Souls" clubs are gone from college campuses. The old fire with which atheists once tangled with the churches has faded.

Atheists Independent
"Atheists aren't very good at keeping up organizations," said Joseph Lewis, president of the Freethinkers of America. "They're rather independent-minded."

His organization, which 20 years ago had branches in about 10 cities, now has none. It no longer has a paid headquarters staff. Its weekly meetings, which used to draw 200 people every Sunday, were abandoned in the 1940s.

Organized interest has lagged, Lewis said, because "the opposition isn't as strong as it used to be."

"There's been a considerable liberalizing of religion," he said. "The lines of conflict aren't as clearly drawn. But from the standpoint of intellectual growth, atheism is increasing."

Branches Disappear
Another organization of atheists and agnostics, the National Liberal League, also has shrunk radically. None of the approximately 200 local branches it had across the country in the 1930s now remain.

The association headed by Smith also has lost all the dozen or so local chapters it used to have. Its weekly lectures, which formerly averaged 400 paid admissions, now draw only a handful—admission free.

"It's hard to get anyone out for a meeting anymore," Smith said. "We don't have the great orators we once had. There used to be a dozen of them touring the country back in the late 19th Century. That was the most vigorous period for atheism."

Ingersoll Days Over
Those were the days of Robert G. Ingersoll, eloquent champion of American atheism, and his slashing war on religion as superstition and a roadblock to scientific progress. Thousand swarmed to hear him.

Nowadays, Smith said, things are a bit too tame to suit the cause. Why, he added, a dedicated atheist can't even get himself arrested anymore to dramatize an issue.

Just recently, his organization tried to provoke an arrest by defying a post office ruling against mailing some material harshly lambasting the new "In God We Trust" mottoes on postage stamps. **Cannot Get Arrested**

"We wanted an arrest," Smith said, "but all they did was seize the material."

Things were different back in 1929 when Smith got jailed in Little Rock, Ark., for blasphemy—he'd been denouncing a proposed law to ban teaching of evolution. His appeal was dismissed after five years—untried.

Organized atheism suffers, Smith said, both when religion is too widespread and influential, and when religion takes more rational positions.

As for present signs of strengthened religion, Smith said "some of the evidence is hard to explain away," but that he felt the growth of church life is mostly as social centers.

Subscribers Dwindle
Smith, a white-haired man of 68, publishes the country's oldest, continuous atheist periodical. "The Truth Seeker," a monthly founded in 1873. In the early era, it had 10,000 subscribers. Now about 2,000.

Despite organizational losses, Lewis also maintained that "organization does not reflect our strength"—and that current church growth is based on social motives. **Ingersoll Needed**

"If an Ingersoll arose today," Lewis said, "he would draw 10 times as many as in his own day, and be just as great an attraction."

Both Smith and Lewis cited historical cases where churches condemned scientific discovery. "But most of this is in the past," Lewis said. "The religious leaders no longer object to science. They're afraid to face the opposition any longer. That's why I say the tendency is toward atheism."

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