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### October 31, 2009: The Debate Over the Future of Secularism

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Title: The Debate Over the Future of Secularism

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10/31/2009—Happy Halloween everyone. In a way, Halloween is my subject today. For a debate about the future of secularism broke out last week in the “pages” of Religion Dispatches that relates to Halloween. On Tuesday, 10/27, Anthony Pinn, Agnes Cullen Arnold Professor of Humanities and Professor of Religious Studies at Rice University, wrote about attending the Atheist Alliance International 2009 convention. Pinn criticized the New Atheists (the Richard Dawkins crowd) for its negative “victory over God” approach. Something positive is needed, says Pinn. Then Austin Dacey, philosopher and author of *The Secular Conscience*, responded on Thursday, 10/29. Dacey heard in Pinn rather more than he had actually said. Dacey heard what he calls the fallacy of decomposition, the idea that as religious institutions decline, “there must be a single new institution that arises to serve the same social functions” that churches used to serve. It comes down to this. If we don’t go to church, will we go somewhere else on Saturday or Sunday mornings, or Friday nights? Some humanists expect humanist organizations to replace churches. It is the difference between supporting Doctors Without Borders and expecting them to officiate at your wedding. I pondered this same question in *Hallowed Secularism*. Is the future of secularism to be a new institution of some kind (or institutions of some kinds) or is *Hallowed Secularism* something the culture itself becomes. Dacey as usual is too glib. Does he have children I wonder? Someone actually does have to perform weddings. I hope the work of churches is not now to be taken over by the State. And some institution(s) have to help me raise my kids. Secularists who think the wisdom of Africa, “it takes a village,” is cool when confined to Africa, suddenly retreat to anarchist individualism when it comes to western culture. No, it takes more than parents to raise children here too. Which brings me back to Halloween. Here is a mainstream cultural ritual. Maybe Halloween should be the model for the secular future. Halloween is not a fringe group of humanists meeting in a hotel room. But it is not isolated families either. Nor is Thanksgiving. Nor Memorial Day. (Yet I don’t want to substitute America for the churches either).