

Atheists, Agnostics, Humanists, and Spiritual but Not Religious Identities

One-fifth of the U.S. public and one-third of U.S. adults under the age of 30 consider themselves to be “religiously unaffiliated,” or nonreligious. This broad and growing group has come to be known sometimes as the Nones, which comes from the observation that more and more people checked the “None” box when asked to identify their religious orientation in various surveys. or those who might check the “None” box on a spiritual identification survey. This is a very diverse group: those who check the “None” box might have been raised religious or never exposed to religion much at all. They may believe in God or not. They may find spiritual resources like community and chaplaincy support very meaningful. At Tufts, we want to make the University Chaplaincy as accessible as possible for everyone. The Humanist Chaplaincy focuses in particular on those who don’t consider themselves to be “religious” but are still asking big questions about life and meaning.

From 2014 to 2019, the University Chaplaincy’s annual Spiritual Interest survey indicates that more than 40% of incoming undergraduate and graduate/professional students at Tufts self-identified as: with a label we might consider a part of the Nones, Atheists, Humanists, Non-Religious, Agnostic, and Spiritual but Not Religious students. But what do these labels mean exactly?



Nonreligious community members gather at the Lodge in 2013.

Nonreligious/Nones

The terms nonreligious and Nones are often used as catch-alls for anyone who isn’t affiliated with a religious tradition; this is a big and philosophically diverse group.

Atheist

An atheist is anyone who doesn’t believe in a God, or gods. They may actively believe there is no God, or may simply live life under the assumption that God/god does not exist.



Agnostic

Someone is agnostic, who holds the view that ultimate reality (such as God) is unknown and probably unknowable broadly. One who is not committed to believe in either the existence or the nonexistence of God or a god.

Humanist

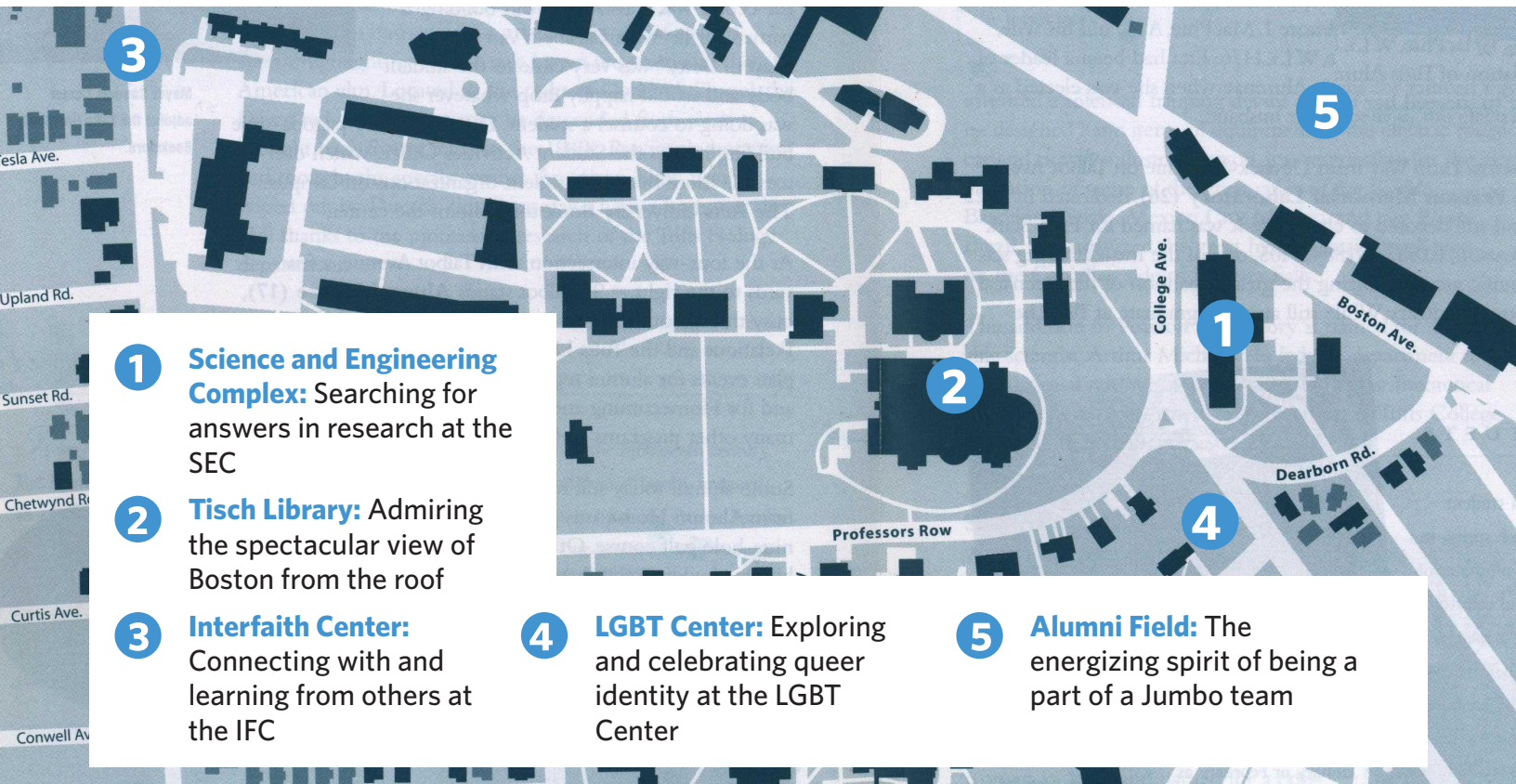
A secular humanist, or Humanist with a capital H, is usually someone who primarily finds inspiration in the natural world and the possibilities of their fellow people. The Humanist movement in the United States has influences from Ethical Culture to atheism, and scientific rationalism.

Spiritual

Someone who is “Spiritual but Not Religious” likely doesn’t affiliate with a particular religious tradition, but finds inspiration from or engages with spiritual and theological ideas and/or practices.

Community members engage at the Death Café program hosted by the Humanist Chaplaincy in 2019.

Where do Nones find meaning, inspiration, and reflection?



1 Science and Engineering Complex: Searching for answers in research at the SEC

2 Tisch Library: Admiring the spectacular view of Boston from the roof

3 Interfaith Center: Connecting with and learning from others at the IFC

4 LGBT Center: Exploring and celebrating queer identity at the LGBT Center

5 Alumni Field: The energizing spirit of being a part of a Jumbo team

Further Readings and Resources

Interested in exploring these ideas further? The following are a selection of books that investigate contemporary atheism, Humanism, and spirituality in the United States.

- *The Year of Magical Thinking* by Joan Didion (2007)
- *Doubt: A History* by Jennifer Michael Hecht (2003)
- *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* by Sikivu Hutchinson (2011)
- *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism* by Anthony Pinn (2001)
- *Contact* by Carl Sagan (1985)
- *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Prose* by Alice Walker (1983)

How can I get more involved?

Visit the Humanist Chaplaincy website at chaplaincy.tufts.edu/humanist to sign up for updates on upcoming programs and resources relevant to nonreligious life. Two student groups that welcome and engage the spiritual and philosophical experiences of nonreligious students are the Humanist Community at Tufts (HCAT) and Community of Faith Exploration and Engagement (COFFEE).



The Tufts Humanist Chaplaincy serves everyone on campus, especially if you don't consider yourself to be religious. You're always welcome to connect with any of our several group meetings, join in service and educational projects, or connect with the Humanist Chaplain to learn more. Feel free to e-mail Humanist Chaplain Walker Bristol at walker.bristol@tufts.edu to arrange a time to meet or learn more.

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