

It's the end of the world as they know it, and atheists feel fine

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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(RNS) Harold Camping's campaign to warn Christians that the rapture is coming on Saturday (May 21) may have won him a band of followers, especially among those who have reportedly quit jobs or used up their life savings.

But Camping's acolytes may pale in comparison to the number of atheists and agnostics who are outraged -- and perhaps a little amused -- by the California radio evangelist's predictions that Christians are about to be swept up to glory.

Recognizing an opportunity, unbelieving Americans are using Camping's doomsday scenario to host rapture parties, fundraisers, and conventions to raise awareness of their views. In America's hotly contested religious marketplace, atheists know an opportunity when they see one.

Or, as David Silverman, president of American Atheists put it, to "call out the stupid."

"When we heard the date, it was out of my mouth immediately: 'We should have a party!'" said Geri Weaver, president of Central North Carolina Atheists and Humanists in Fayetteville, N.C.

Weaver's group recently formed as a chapter of the American Humanist Association, and members were looking for the right moment to host a "coming out party." Camping's "Judgment Day" campaign seemed the perfect pretext.

The timing also helped Weaver's group get atheist rapper Greydon Square for a "Rapture RAP-Up" event on Sunday, following the group's

"Rapture After Party" Saturday.

The idea that atheists are using May 21 for their own purposes doesn't surprise Allison Warden, a Camping follower who, with the help of family and friends, built a website, wecanknow.com, to support the doomsday prediction.

"Some of the things they're doing is a fulfillment of prophesy," she said. "They've persecuted Christians in this way before. Believers can expect similar treatment."

The biggest atheist event will kick off Saturday in Oakland, Calif., where organizers are hosting a two-day West Coast Rapture RAM, or Regional Atheist Meet, with speakers, stand-up comedy acts, maybe even "de-baptism" events.

Atheist groups in Houston and Fort Lauderdale are planning similar events.

Rapture party invitations have been multiplying on Facebook and other social media sites. One website posted recipe drinks "to die for." Others are finding campy constructions to get the word out: "Party like there's no tomorrow," and "one HELL of a party," are just a few examples.

Some of these events are hosted by church-going Christians, the majority of whom find no support for Camping's predictions. Robert Fischer, a second-year student at the Duke Divinity School in Durham, N.C., is one of them.

The idea, Fischer said, is to "get friends together, enjoy ourselves and deal with the here-and-now, not with fear-mongering hypotheticals."

But it's the secularists who see the biggest windfall from the doomsday prognosticators.

Less than 5 percent of Americans say they don't believe in God, according to a study by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life. But America's fastest-growing belief group is Americans who say they have no faith -- doubling in the past decade to 16 percent of the population,

according to the same survey.

Various groups would love to claim those unaffiliated Americans. For atheists, working as a foil to extremist beliefs has been an effective way to capitalize on people's dissatisfaction with religion.

Rapture parties are the perfect time to "ridicule and poke fun at the fools," said Silverman of American Atheists.

Others, however, would like to do so without gloating.

"We're trying to raise awareness of the danger of the thing," said Sean Gillespie, president of the group Air Capital Skeptics in Wichita, Kansas. "There are people who are going to believe they've been left behind Saturday. We're going to have discussions about the history of these doomsday cults because we've seen this before, and we want to prevent these people from joining those groups."