



The Freethought Society News

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Octorara School Board and Residents Defend BSA Public School Assemblies

by Margaret Downey

Since September 2014, representatives from the Freethought Society (FS) have formally objected to school sponsored Boy Scouts of America (BSA) recruitment assemblies allowed by the Octorara School District in Atglen, Pennsylvania. The assemblies take place on school grounds, during the school day, and BSA receives assembly assistance through teachers and staff.

The following article, written by correspondent **Debbie Wyngent** appeared on Monday, April 13, 2015 on *Lancaster Online*:

Freethought Society Challenges Octorara on Boy Scout Policy

The Freethought Society, a national organization that advocates for the nontheist community, is drawing attention to the Octorara Area School District for allowing the Boy Scouts to hold recruitment assemblies on school property during the school day.

Margaret Downey, president of the group, based in Pocopson, Chester County, said her organization was contacted by a parent who wishes to remain anonymous after the district allowed Boy Scout assemblies to take place at school on September 15, 2014. Nontheism is a term that covers a range of views characterized by the absence or rejection of belief in a deity or gods.

The society has lobbied against the Scouting group in other school districts and in Philadelphia for what it calls discrimination against gays and nontheists. Downey sued the Boy Scouts through the Pennsylvania Human Relations Commission. She said her son, Matthew Schottmiller, was kicked out of Scouting for being a nontheist.

In the suit, she requested the Boy Scouts of America allow members to affirm an obligation to "good" rather than to "God." Downey also said the organization uses its private organization status to avoid compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act by barring overweight Scouts from some programs and does not allow gay or nontheist parents to be volunteers.

Downey and a group of concerned citizens plan to speak at a school board meeting on April 20. She said they plan to ask the board to end the practice of allowing the private Scouting organization from recruiting during school hours and on school property.

Not on agenda

Superintendent Tom Newcome, citing Downey's nonresident status and legal advice in light of the society's history of litigation, said the board has declined to put the matter on the agenda.

Under board policy, agenda items may be suggested by residents but not nonresidents, and whether matters will be included on the written agenda is at the discretion of the board. The Sunshine Act doesn't require school boards to have written agendas, but boards must give the public ample opportunity to comment on school district matters.

In a Dec. 11, 2014 story in the Philadelphia Gay News, Newcome is quoted as saying local Boy Scout troops are open and welcoming, have provided great opportunities for children and the board feels the issue is a local matter.

"If any student has been harmed by the BSA presentations or if discrimination is brought forward in regards to local troops, the school board should be made aware and the district will address the situation," Newcome told the newspaper.

Newcome said neither he nor school board members will offer further comment on the issue until the April 20 meeting.

Charlie Rogers, Scout Executive with the Chester County Council of Boy Scouts of America, said no parents or Scouts from Octorara or other area troops have made discrimination complaints to the council.

"Our programs are open to all kids regardless of sexual orientation," he said.

Gray area

As far as leadership is concerned, Rogers said there have been no complaints and "local organizations select appropriate role models and we don't question who they pick."

Rogers said the Boy Scouts do have some religious requirements and called this a "gray area." He said troops that meet at churches might begin their meetings with a prayer, while those meeting in public schools often skip prayer. He said most religious activities associated with the Boy Scouts are conducted on a family level.

"We have had lots of kids who don't have a belief in God and most of them function well (within Scouting)," Rogers said.

The Associated Press reported April 2 that the Boy Scouts' New York chapter has hired the nation's first openly gay Eagle Scout as a summer camp leader, a direct and public challenge to the national scouting organization's ban on openly gay adult members. The national organization changed its policy in 2013 to allow openly gay youth as Scouts, but not openly gay adult leaders.

The school board meeting begins at 7 p.m. in the Octorara Junior High School multipurpose room.

Members of Downey's group are expected to speak during public comment at the end of the meeting.

On April 20, 2015, **Glen Loev** (FS Vice-President), **Tom Schottmiller** and I attended the Octorara school board meeting. We were not allowed to speak because we do not reside in the Octorara area. Fortunately, local resident **John Stoltzfus** was allowed to voice his concerns about BSA assemblies. Stoltzfus was a student in the Octorara public school system and currently resides in the district.

Stoltzfus' comments from that night were printed in the May/June 2015 issue of *The Freethought Society News* (See: "Trying to Stop Public School BSA Recruitment Assemblies"). Stoltzfus' high school friend, **Jason Chestnut**, also attended, but since he was no longer a resident of Octorara he was not allowed to speak either.

Until that April 20th school board meeting, board members and Superintendent **Dr. Thomas Newcome** had refused to acknowledge any FS correspondence or messages from residents (of which FS was copied). Even questions from the media and requests for interviews went unanswered.

That night, under the agenda heading of "Visitors' Comments," I stated that I reside in Chester County. A board

member asked me, "What is your exact city of residence?" When I stated "West Chester," many of the board members shouted, at almost the exact same time, "Out of district. You can't speak."

Having noticed a camera and technician, I knew that the meeting was being filmed. I made sure to step into view of the camera and handed my written statement to as many of the board members that I could reach. Having anticipated not being able to address the board in the public forum that night, I included Loev's written statement with my handout. Our statements were reprinted in the May/June 2015 issue of *The Freethought Society News* (See: "Trying to Stop Public School BSA Recruitment Assemblies"). Our goal of delivering our concerns to the board members was accomplished even though we had to remain silent.

Interestingly, the reaction I got from the school board members when I told them the city in which I reside was absent from the final edited version of the film made that night.

After Stoltzfus expressed his objections to BSA assemblies, several residents spoke. We were all stunned by some of the commentary. The following description of the statements will likely surprise you as well.

The first resident to speak was **Larry Denver** of Londonderry Township. He stated that he pays a sizable chunk of real estate taxes. He also proudly disclosed that he is "a committee person for Londonderry Township and is vice-president of The Faith and Freedom Coalition of Pennsylvania."

I immediately recognized the organization name because members of the group had contacted me in the past to voice their objection to FS's goals. The Faith and Freedom Coalition of Pennsylvania is a chapter of a national organization that is described as "an American ecumenical Christian social conservative 501(c)4 nonprofit organization founded by **Ralph Reed**." Below is a description of the group's "educational" mission copied from their website:

Education is at the very core of everything we do at Faith & Freedom. If we are informed, as a people, about the truths that our forefathers found 'self-evident,' then we can, with God's help, return our nation to the correct path. With that in mind, we focus our attention on:

- * Teaching about how America was founded as a Judeo-Christian Nation.*
- * Reviewing religious roles in the founding of this country.*
- * Teaching the importance of religious leaders, past and present.*
- * Teaching original intent of the Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution.*
- * Discussion of the processes that anti-religious groups are using to shut down Freedom of Religion in and out of the public arena.*
- * Educating on the vital importance of strong involvement in our Local Government.*
- * Educating on the fallacy of separation of Church and state.*

The anti-secular list of “educational” goals made me cringe. Imagine no separation of “church and state.” This group would be singing a different tune if they found themselves a minority religious order, dealing with intrusive cultural, social, and personal pressures to be more like the majority. They would then understand why government and religion must stay separate.

The rest of the items listed are conservative Christian rhetoric and reflect the narrow-minded thinking of their membership. The Faith and Freedom Coalition of Pennsylvania is determined to rewrite history and erase the fact that the United States was founded on secular values that protect the minority from the majority.

Denver said there are three parts to the BSA assembly controversy which can be addressed in any First Amendment challenge — freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and the right to petition the government.

Denver said that he would not restrict Stoltz’s right in saying that he doesn’t believe in a deity, but he supports that right equally to BSA saying that there is a deity.

Denver told the school board members that The Faith and Freedom Coalition of Pennsylvania will offer legal support to counter any discrimination lawsuits that might result from allowing BSA to conduct recruitment assemblies. He also offered his assistance to “not restrict BSA’s freedom of expression.”

Denver disclosed that he teaches Constitutional classes and has been doing so for six years. He said he has read the Constitution thoroughly and there is “no right against being offended in the Constitution.”

Denver also stated that, “There is no right against the offense that a person might feel discriminated against.”

I suppose Denver thinks that Constitutional tenets protecting the minority against the majority do not apply in this case.

I tried to contact Denver after the meeting to interview him and to find out where he teaches. He never returned my call. I could only find evidence that Denver “teaches” his conservative viewpoints about the Constitution in living rooms of private homes in Chester County, Pennsylvania. His “classes” are advertised through the Coalition for Advancing Freedom — a group that describes its member base as people who “...believe in God in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and like our founders, believe that faith and religious practice contribute positively to a moral and civil society.”

In another display of his inability to equally accept non-religious fellow citizens, Denver said that he would support atheists starting “their own organization.”

Then, way off topic, Denver said that he “sees attacks against religion happening all over the country.” He stated that “one church in Bucks County had three burning incidents in the last few days,” and “a church in Delaware had a similar incident recently.”

We were amazed that Denver was trying to connect these church burning problems to our protest efforts against BSA assemblies. He said, “This a movement that has not only gone on primarily across the country, but also across the world.”



The FS contingent looked at each other in utter disbelief. Denver was trying to relate the Bucks County and Delaware church burning incidents to atheists and even stated that “These things are being prevalent and normal now. It’s time to draw a line in the sand. We need to stop this.”

Denver said that the Octorara area has “a long, long history of faith.” He went on to say that “personally” he “doesn’t have the kind of faith that it would take to *not* believe in God. It takes a lot of faith to turn your back on something that’s like that.”

Denver ended his commentary saying, “The right not to believe is guaranteed in the Constitution, but the Boy Scouts have that same guaranteed right.”

All five freethinkers held up small (8½” X 11”), double-sided protest signs which we created ahead of time knowing that we would probably not be able to speak at the meeting. The signs stated, “Stop Boy Scouts of America recruitment assemblies!” and “Public schools should not condone, enable or promote discrimination!”

Denver did not grasp the issue at all, but the issue is very simple. The public school system, which is an extension of the government, should not be entangled with a private religious organization by providing a place for recruitment, help in getting the children to that place, and using the school day to endorse said private religious group. Pointing out the religiosity of BSA was strengthening our case — or so we hoped.

David Blank from Highland Township said that he had recently read an article in the local newspaper about the BSA assembly controversy. He was in attendance because he wanted the school board to know that BSA is “a legal organization that operates within the law and complies with the laws of the United States, the Commonwealth, and our community. The Boy Scouts are a lawful organization and, in fact, teach Scouts — young people, to obey the laws.”

Blank was ignoring the fact that there are anti-discrimination laws at local, state and federal levels. This is, in fact, why BSA decided to declare themselves a “private” organization. They did so in order to get around those anti-discrimination laws that would have applied to them had they remained a public organization that services the entire community — the organization envisioned by its founder but privatized by BSA executives in order to keep some unwanted members of the community out.

Blank insisted that BSA “operates according to the values that are consistent with the Octorara community.”

Well, hopefully not. Otherwise it means that one of the values held dear to the community is bigotry! Blank was making the assumption that all Octorara citizens held his values — values that include religious superiority and prejudices.

Had I been able to counter Blank’s comments, I would have pointed out that even the Octorara School District has in place anti-discrimination policies. The exact wording of the policy is:

The Octorara Area School District is an equal opportunity education institution and will not discriminate on the basis of race, color, creed,

religion, age, gender, ancestry, national origin, disability, sexual orientation, marital status, or a health or medical condition in its educational programs, activities, or employment practices as required by Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

Blank went on to say that **Charlie Rodgers**, the Chester County Scout Executive, was reported as saying “that there have been no complaints about the local leadership.”

Blank said “the benefits of Scouting are numerous and are recognized by the community. If this were not the case,” he said, “the Boy Scouts in the Octorara area would probably not exist.”

Once again, brushing the community in the same color as himself, Blank said that “people in this community participate in and support BSA.”

Well, those who are allowed, that is! The entire reason we object to BSA assemblies is that they do not include the entire community. Statistically, a community of over 87,000 people such as Octorara will have a sizable number of gay and nontheist residents.

The statement Blank made next proved why the Octorara school board must not allow BSA assemblies. Blank stated that BSA supports education in their programs and that “makes BSA a partner with the Octorara School District.”

Digging the hole even deeper, Blank said, “The superintendent and the school board have been charged with advancing the education of children in the district and the Boy Scouts are working with you in that task.”

Wow! I could not have stated the collaboration any better. This type of connection is what makes the Octorara anti-discrimination policy invalid when BSA is allowed to recruit on school grounds, during school hours. Plus the entanglement of teachers and school officials forces them into the discriminatory profile of BSA! This is what must be stopped. Blank was unknowingly making the points of why we object to the BSA and school entanglement for us!

Blank said, “Nobody is required to participate in Scouting.”

He acknowledged that Octorara is a pluralistic community and went on to say, “as a public school, we must reflect that pluralism.”

He, of course, left out the fact that giving BSA a place to hold a recruitment assembly, a time slot where students are captive audience members and providing them help from teachers is showing favoritism to a private organization that discriminates against nontheists and gays. Doing so does not protect or advocate for the appreciation of pluralism.

Blank, insisted, however that “...it makes sense that the Boy Scouts would be permitted to hold assemblies.”

His rationale was that BSA should not be restricted on account that they are perceived to hold to a set of beliefs that are not contrary to the purposes of public good and public education. “On the contrary,” Blank said, BSA “promotes the

public good and public education — and they are an honorable organization.”

Blank asked the school board members to continue to allow the BSA assemblies because BSA “seeks to advance healthy and safe adventure, citizenship, personal fitness, and fun.”

FS representatives all agree that BSA programs are fun and offer a lot to youth — that is precisely why all children should be welcomed, not just religious applicants.

I asked if I could remark on some of the comments that were made and to speak on behalf of the Octorara residents that contacted FS to represent their concerns.

School Board president **Lisa Bowman** said, “No.” Then she said that Octorara residents had ample opportunity to come forward and talk to the board. She also said that people who objected to BSA assemblies could have spoken to Dr. Newcome at either a public board meeting or through a private meeting. She said not one person has come forward to voice concerns.

I said that these folks approached FS with their concerns because they actually fear for their jobs and wanted to stay anonymous.

Bowman insisted that anyone in the Octorara community has an opportunity to speak for themselves and no one has come to either Dr. Newcome or any member of the Board.

I wanted to make it clear that speaking to Dr. Newcome was not possible since he is a well-known

Christian leader and one of the persons who voiced a concern to FS is a teacher under his direct supervision. A discussion — even a private one — was out of the question because of fear of retribution. I was silenced at that point, however.

School Board vice-president **Brian Norris** said he did research on BSA cases and discovered that in 2006 there was a similar situation in Oregon. The case of *Powell v. Portland Public School District & Stan Bunn, Superintendent of Public Instruction* was heard at the Oregon Supreme Court.

“In that case,” Norris said, “the [Oregon] Supreme Court ruled in favor of the school district and BSA was not found to be discriminating.”

Since I was not allowed to say anything, I could not address the details of the case at that time. I will now.

There are many rulings at State Supreme Courts levels that differ on opinions. State decisions do not set in stone a precedent for other states to follow.

In the case of *Powell v. Portland Public School District & Stan Bunn, Superintendent of Public Instruction*, there were conflicting decisions at several levels.

The final decision favored BSA because they had agreed to not state on any literature being circulated by the teachers that they have private and discriminatory membership rules. This case was not about the school sponsoring BSA assemblies during the school day and using the help of teachers and/or administrators. The facts of the Oregon case are completely different from what FS is objecting to in Pennsylvania.

***“Statistically,
a community
of over 87,000 people,
such as Octorara,
will have a sizable number
of gay
and nontheist residents.”***

School board member **Sheri Melton** said that she doesn't think "...the Boy Scouts are the enemy of American freedom."

Melton then said, "It's ISIS."

There was complete silence and everyone had puzzled looks on their faces, wondering if Melton meant for us to be talking about ways in which to stop ISIS instead of addressing the discriminatory practices of BSA. The comment was certainly out of place and distracting. The uncomfortable silence was broken when school board Treasurer **Samuel Ganow** said that if people came forward to complain in person, they would not be punished or lose their job because "that does not happen here."

Ganow also said, "If he were the superintendent, over the years some people would have lost their job, so Dr. Newcome deserved a lot of credit."

Ganow remarked that in the 20 years that he has been on the Board, he has never personally approved any assembly. Ganow claimed that it is not a policy that needs to be addressed by the board. Ganow explained that the board's duty was to look at budget numbers, not to decide what goes on at school assemblies.

School board member **Timothy Alexander** said that when he heard this BSA assembly issue would be talked about he researched BSA policies. He said that he found out BSA has badges that recognize 37 different religions. Alexander concluded that he finds it hard to label the organization as discriminatory when they are using the concept of God so generally in their material. "Members can believe in any God," he said.

Alexander said that he found it difficult to have a group that "open-minded being labeled close-minded and bigoted." He said his position is that the Boy Scouts are welcomed in Octorara, as is any other youth group that ...that positively impacts children.

Alexander's logic failed to acknowledge that there are many people who don't believe in any gods *at all*. He completely ignored the existence of nontheist citizens, even though five of us were sitting in the audience, and one lived in the district.

Alexander also failed to consider that there are roughly 4,200 religions in the world. That means BSA is accepting and acknowledging less than 1 percent of religions!

I wanted to jump out of my chair to inform the school board that BSA is very intolerant of religions that do not agree 100 percent with their views on God and their membership policies.

In 1992, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) Board of Trustees passed a resolution opposing BSA's anti-Agnostic, anti-Atheist, and anti-gay policies.

By 1998, BSA determined that UUAs could no longer award its religious emblems to its Boy Scouts. This was done as a punishment to UUA for not agreeing with BSA membership policies. In addition, no UUA Boy Scout was allowed to wear his previously earned emblem. Many UUA Scouts continued to wear their "Religion in Life" and "Love and Help" emblems in defiance of BSA prohibition. I wanted to ask the Octorara school board members, "How tolerant and accepting is that policy?"

Bowman said that up until this evening neither the superintendent nor the board has been contacted by any residents of the school district who have concerns about BSA assemblies. That is not true as we know of email messages and of Stoltzfus, who voiced his concerns early in the meeting, and was sitting right there!

It became apparent that the school board could not be convinced that BSA should not be allowed to conduct recruitment assemblies on the grounds, during the school day. The entanglement between a public school and a private religious organization did not appear to bother school board members one bit. Letters sent to them by local residents were not discussed and neither were the letters they received from the American Humanist Association, The Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Center for Inquiry, as well as from others who have been harmed elsewhere due to BSA bigotry.

Ignoring the national BSA issue of prejudices will not make the issue disappear, however. A promise from a local resident to cover legal costs in the event that the Octorara School District is sued for allowing a student to be discriminated against is foolish. The school board is expressing complete disregard in protecting children who are from gay and nontheist homes. Such a position makes a potential lawsuit all the more costly because they were forewarned about the problem and did nothing to stop it. The school board had an opportunity to sever their ties with a private religious group, but failing to do so placed their budget at risk and makes a mockery of the schools anti-discrimination policy. Since the specifications of that anti-discrimination document are not being applied to BSA assemblies, the Octorara school board may as well revoke the policy altogether.

On Tuesday, April 28, 2015, *Lancaster Online* published the following article written by correspondent Wygent, who also wrote the April 13, 2015 article:

Octorara School Board Allows Boy Scout Recruiting Despite Protest

Octorara Area School District plans to continue to allow the Boy Scouts of America to hold recruitment assemblies at school this fall despite a Freethought Society protest during a school board meeting April 20.

Five members of the society, saying Octorara should not welcome the organization because it discriminates against gays and nontheists, carried signs of protest to draw attention to the issue. Not all protesters were allowed to speak because school board policy only grants that privilege to district residents.

Margaret Downey, president of the group, said in a written statement given to the school board and a reporter that she wanted to speak on behalf of society members in the district who were afraid to speak.

She called hosting recruitment assemblies "an unethical scenario where nontheist families are targeted as unwelcome members of society."

"The Octorara School District has a sound non-discrimination policy in place, but allowing Boy Scouts of America recruitment assemblies to take place violates that policy," Downey said.

Octorara graduate John Stoltzfus was the only group member who was allowed to speak. He said the assemblies violate the First Amendment because the association discriminates against those who don't believe in God. Stoltzfus said school grounds are for the whole community. He called the notion that those who don't believe in God can't have morals "nonsensical."

In his written statement, Dr. Glen Loev of Bryn Mawr said he wanted to speak for teachers and parents who were apprehensive about speaking in public.

"Allowing the Boy Scouts of America to hold promotional meetings in public school during school hours, with the assistance of teachers, puts an official stamp of approval on the Boy Scouts' policies and rules — the positive things that they do and stand for, but also their hurtful, discriminatory policies," he wrote. "Not intentionally, but effectively, you are condoning discrimination against gay people. Do not send a message to these students that their parents, their families are inferior, and that it is OK to discriminate against them."

Board president Lisa Bowman said until that evening the district had not received any comments or concerns about Boy Scout assemblies.

Larry Denver of Londonderry Township, vice president of the Faith and Freedom Coalition of Pennsylvania, said the coalition would stand with the school district if it continued to host Boy Scout assemblies.

David Blank of Highland Township said, "Tolerance is not about having belief. It's about how your beliefs lead you to treat other people."

Board member Tim Alexander said he thinks it is difficult to label the Boy Scouts as discriminatory because they use the concept of God "so generally in their material."

"My position is the Boy Scouts are welcome as is any other youth group that provides a positive impact to these kids," Alexander said.

Superintendent Tom Newcome said via email he made the decision to welcome Scouting assemblies again this fall with the input of the school board and other administrators.

"At this time I plan to continue allowing the local Boy Scout troop leaders to hold their 20-minute assembly in the

fall," Newcome said. "We allow the Girl Scouts the same opportunity."

Within a month of the Octorara school board meeting, **Robert M. Gates**, the president of BSA, called for an end to BSA's ban on gay adult leaders. In his speech at the annual national BSA meeting, Gates warned BSA executives that "we must deal with the world as it is, not as we might wish it to be."

Gates also said that cascading events — including potential employment discrimination lawsuits and the impending Supreme Court decision on same-sex marriage, as well as mounting internal dissent over the exclusionary policy — had led him to conclude that the current rules "cannot be sustained."

Gates said that if BSA does not change on its own, the courts are likely to force them to, and "we must all understand that this will probably happen sooner rather than later." Showing insight to the problem, Gates went on to say, "I truly fear that any other alternative will be the end of us as a national movement."

Gates also stated, "If we wait for the courts to act, we could end up with a broad ruling that could forbid any kind of membership standard," such as the belief in a duty to God and the goal of specifically serving the needs of boys."

Why wouldn't BSA just treat every person with respect, decency and human kindness — even nontheists? Discrimination is wrong whether it is against gays, nontheists, girls, the overweight and/or the disabled.

The bottom line is that even Gates, the president of BSA, is concerned about discrimination lawsuits. He is fully aware that bigoted BSA membership rules could hurt someone. Why then is the Octorara School District unable and unwilling to be proactive to prevent cases of discrimination and why are they not abiding by their very own anti-discrimination policies? Saying that nobody has been harmed so far is a poor policy that protects nobody. Ignoring BSA bigotry places Octorara students, teachers, administrators and even taxpayers in a very vulnerable situation.

The below cartoon drawn by FS supporter **Celestia Ward** conveys it all. □



Atheism at Work

by Elizabeth Bujan (pictured below)

I will never forget my first visit to the Center for Inquiry-West, located in Hollywood, California. That is where I saw a screening of **Julia Sweeney's** monologue entitled, *Letting Go of God*. The play really resonated with me. My journey to atheism has many of the same components as Sweeney's story: I was born into a Catholic family, moved into New Age beliefs and discarded them both later in life.



I was born to a lower-middle-class family in Detroit, Michigan. My father was a painter, my mother was a homemaker. I was the second of three children.

Dad emigrated from Spain and met my mother in the 1960s. They were married when she became pregnant with my older brother. We were reared as members of the Catholic Church. Dad was from the "old country" and he firmly believed in the philosophy of "spare the rod, spoil the child." Dad owned two machetes, which he used to threaten us with often.

During grade school I was enrolled in catechism at the church, and I suffered physical and mental abuse at the hands of those in authority. My questions were met with scorn at best, and beatings at worst. My education consisted of lessons about the Ten Commandments and the concept of Hell.

I particularly remember a lesson about "coveting." I was shocked to learn that just the act of wanting something that belonged to another person was punishable with spending an eternity in Hell.

We were taught the story of Jesus and I recall being upset and in tears because I wanted to know why didn't anyone save him? Jesus was such a good guy and did all these miracles, yet he was tortured and killed. No one stood up to save Jesus. This left me with the thought that if I did good in the world like Jesus, I might end up tortured and nailed to a piece of wood!

My religious education ended abruptly when, at the age of thirteen, my mother packed us up and left while dad was at work. She made her departure because in the years after my sister was born dad began to drink heavily. Maybe he could not handle the pressure of having another child to feed, but he often came home drunk and beat us indiscriminately. Many times he would yell at my mother until she broke down and cried.

The day we left, I came home from a half-day at school and was told to take whatever I could. I was informed that we were leaving, never to return.

I didn't want to leave. We had a big house that I loved. But my mother knew that there had to be a better life for us, away from my dad. We had family in three other states: California, Indiana, and Arizona. We took a vote to decide

where we would end up, and California was the winning choice.

After we left Detroit, mom tried to find another spiritual home for us with little success. When I was sixteen, a nice family from the Jehovah's Witnesses religion came knocking on our door. This seemed as good a place as any, so we began to attend meetings at the Kingdom Hall. The family that recruited us brought me into their home for Bible study classes, which began with memorizing chapters of the Holy Bible. I found this rote exercise tedious and unnecessary.

One day I was asked if I believed that every word in the Bible was true. I could not bring myself to say "yes." My Bible studies ended after that and I was no longer welcomed back.

I then began to have disagreements with Jehovah Witness doctrines. First, this religion rejects evolution. I had become interested in science, so the nonacceptance of the theory of evolution did not sit well with me. I defiantly brought science books and read them at religious meetings.

My mother abruptly stopped taking us to those meetings and I learned later it was because she found it upsetting that they do not believe in the Trinity. That did not mesh with my mother's Catholic worldview.

To their credit, they are kind and generous people. When our apartment was broken into they helped us. They took my mother to the Department of Motor Vehicles to get a new ID and other needed documents.

After high school I explored other spiritual paths, including Paganism and New Age beliefs. I gave Tarot card readings to friends and studied every manner of New-Age nonsense — from Astrology to Paganism. I spent many years trying to change my circumstances through the casting of spells.

In 2005 I was hired as an administrative assistant at an engineering company. The operations manager held a Bible study in the office, so I decided to explore Christianity again. I read **Rick Warren's** *Purpose Driven Life* and attended Bible study meetings. The meetings were enjoyable at first, but when the subjects turned from being kind to your neighbor to political, I stopped attending. The thing that irked me the most was the anti-lesbian, gay, bi and transgender (LGBT) talk. I was also appalled by all the anti-abortion rhetoric. The boss compared abortion to illegal immigration; when we see it often it becomes the norm. I was deeply troubled that he was bashing women and immigrants with the same statement.

In 2007, I decided to finally go to college and get my degree. It was then that I began to study philosophy and critical thinking. By 2008 a ballot initiative in California caught my attention. It was Proposition 8. This proposition would change the state constitution to define marriage as between one man and one woman only. Gay rights is an issue that is very personal for me. Nothing brings my blood to boil faster than bigotry toward LGBT people. This issue brought me into political activism. Soon I was involved with protesting efforts, holding picket signs, and speaking publicly against Proposition 8.

On October 31, 2007 I was standing on a street corner in La Habra, California when I ran into my old friend Shaun.

I had not seen Shaun in eight years. He attended junior high and high school with my younger sister, and we became friends.

Shaun is the reason I am so fired up about gay rights; he suffered a lot of abuse at the hands of homophobic students in high school. When we reconnected, Shaun introduced me to the “God is Imaginary” website, and he led me to learn more about atheists on YouTube.

This was when my worldview began to drastically change. When **Rene Descartes** wrote his *Discourse on the Method*, he started by doubting everything, to see the world through a new perspective and reject any preconceived ideas. I did the same thing; I went through everything I believed and rejected all my previously held beliefs one by one. While Descartes ended up at a position of theism, I rejected all supernatural and nonscientific ideas.

This felt liberating, but also like I lost something. The best way I can describe how I felt at that time is this: imagine driving down a highway. You can see ahead for miles. Then, all of a sudden you hit a patch of fog. You can’t see more than a few feet in front of you. That is where I was; I held onto this notion that I could somehow predict or alter future events either through divination or New-Age spirituality, now I was faced with the reality that I can’t really know what is going to happen in the future.

It was then that I began searching the Internet for other like-minded people. I had signed up for MeetUp.com in 2007, so I searched for atheist groups there. The first group I found was not a good fit, but then I found the Backyard Skeptics and I’ve been part of that community since 2010. The people I met there have become a second family. Being able to speak to like-minded people and learn more about skepticism has helped me to grow as a freethinker.

In July of 2013 I was laid off from the company that held those Bible meetings. A month later, while searching for another job, I interviewed with a health insurance broker. He had only three employees. I was replacing his receptionist who was leaving to move to nonprofit work. During the interview, the first two questions he asked were, “what church do you go to?” and “are you married?” This was the first of many red flags, but I bluffed my way through the interview, because I was desperate to find another job.

Next the broker explained, “This is a Christian office, and we begin every morning in prayer.” He also said, “You don’t have to pray with us. It’s optional.”

After the first interview he invited me back for a second interview, after which he offered me a job.

I was hesitant to work with someone so religious, so I turned down his offer. He was relentless, however, demanding to know why I did not want the job. I told him it was because he did not offer any health benefits. He offered to help me pay for coverage and begged me to come and work for him. I relented and took the job, starting work on August 12, 2013.

Working for this man was unpleasant, to say the least. The religious talk at the office was unrelenting; every email and phone call ended with the words “have a blessed day.” It was nauseating. He also had mood swings; he was either extremely cheerful or angry. I often sat in my car and cried

before coming to the office, I despised the job so much. I stuck with it only because I needed to work.

On Thursday, September 19, 2013, I was busy at work when the small office staff gathered for prayer. When I did not immediately stand the boss asked, “Aren’t you going to join us for prayer?”

I simply replied, “That’s okay.”

He did not say anything to me for the rest of the day. On the following Monday morning I arrived to find the boss and a few salesman in his office. The door closed and they appeared to be conducting an interview. I knew right away that he was interviewing a replacement for me. I, in fact, could hear him asking all the same questions that he had asked me during my interview.

Four days later, my employer called me into his office and said, “We are going in a different direction.” He then fired me.

When I asked why, he repeated the “going in a different direction” excuse and said that was all his CPA told him to say. That was my first clue that he knew his reason for firing me was illegal discrimination, he was trying not to incriminate himself.

The next day I had to return to pick up some items I had forgotten in the desk, and the girl who previously held that position had returned to train my replacement. It was obvious that he fired me because I did not want to pray with him. Up until that day I would not participate in the prayer, he had no complaints about my job performance, there was no other reason to let me go.

This incident did two things: first it made me more determined to work for atheist acceptance outside of the work environment. I also decided not to ever discuss atheism at work.

An atheist activist I admire once said that we should be out and proud, but the office is not an appropriate place to discuss religion. I regret staying in such a bad work situation for so long. It would have been better to reject a questionable job offer, even in a tough economic climate.

One of the most important things to remember in hostile work situations is that a journal must be kept. Documentation of dates, times, names, and what was said can be used as evidence that work discrimination has taken place. I also suggest recording conversations if that method of documentation is legal in your state.

Work discrimination narratives can be filed through the Anti-Discrimination Support Network — a database founded by **Margaret Downey** through the Freethought Society, now administrated by the Secular Coalition for America. A more formal complaint can be filed through the Equal Employment Opportunities Commission.

In July of 2014, I volunteered at The Amaz!ng Meeting in Las Vegas. This was a turning point for me; it was an awe-inspiring experience seeing so many like-minded people in one place. I am truly proud to be part of this growing movement. Though I am still afraid of losing my job, I want to do all that I can to achieve acceptance for nonbelievers everywhere. Since then I have become more involved in atheist activism, volunteering at conferences and helping to conduct public outreach for atheism. □

The Reverend Barry Lynn's Visit to Pennsylvania and Delaware

by Margaret Downey

When I volunteer to assist in scheduling East Coast speaking engagements for colleagues and friends, the states that are likely included are Maryland, Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey and New York. Depending on the timeframe and venue availability, many groups are included in the plans. Hosting groups are usually from the Unitarian, Ethical Humanist Society, humanist, atheist and freethinking communities.

I was pleased to be able to book the **Reverend Barry Lynn** in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Delaware when his travel scheduled opened up in mid-May 2015. Lynn is executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU), a position he has held since October of 1992. A long-time activist in promoting and defending civil liberties, Lynn came to Americans United with an impressive background in church-state issues.

From 1984 to 1991 he was legislative counsel for the Washington lobbying office of the American Civil Liberties Union, where he frequently worked on church-state issues. From 1974 to 1980 Lynn served in a variety of positions with the national offices of the United Church of Christ, including a two-year stint as legislative counsel for the Church's Office of Church in Society in Washington, D.C.

A member of the Washington, D.C. and Supreme Court bar, Lynn earned his law degree from Georgetown University Law Center in 1978. In addition, he is an ordained minister in the United Church of Christ who received his theology degree from Boston University School of Theology in 1973. Lynn earned his Bachelor's degree at Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in 1970.

An accomplished speaker and lecturer, Lynn has appeared frequently on television and radio broadcasts to debate and discuss First Amendment issues. News programs on which he has appeared include *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, *The Today Show*, *Nightline*, CNN's *Crossfire*, *The Phil Donahue Show*, *Good Morning America*, national nightly news from NBC, ABC and CBS, Comedy Central's *The Daily Show*, *Firing Line*, and *Larry King Live*. He also served for two years as regular co-host of *Pat Buchanan and Company* on the Mutual Broadcasting System, and as the Friday co-host of *Common Sense* with **Colonel Oliver North** until North's recent retirement from radio. Lynn now hosts his own daily syndicated show called *Cultureshocks*.

Lynn is the author of *Piety and Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom* and co-author of *The Right to Religious Liberty*. He writes frequently on First Amendment issues, appearing in such publications as *USA Today*, *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Nation*, *American Teacher* and *Liberty*. His op-eds are often published by the Knight-Ridder and Scripps-Howard newspaper chains.

Lynn's first stop on the speaking tour I arranged for him was in Baltimore, Maryland on Sunday, May 17. There he delivered an 11:00 AM speech at the First Unitarian Church of Baltimore. After a nice lunch provided by his Baltimore hosts, Lynn drove to my home in Chester County, Pennsylvania. He arrived in time to enjoy a small dinner party

with neighbors and friends. Everyone enjoyed the intimate setting as it allowed for interesting conversations and discussions about activism.

The next morning, Lynn and I participated in a one-hour talk show at WCHE, located in West Chester, Pennsylvania. We were interviewed by hosts **Bill Mason**, **Heather Bird**, and **Doug Stirling**. The show on 1520 AM is "Morning Magazine" airing weekdays 9:00 AM until noon.

No calls were received the day Lynn and I were on the air, but the hosts kept the conversation interesting by asking specific questions about Lynn's new book, separation of religion and government, as well as recent Pew survey results.

Pictured below is Lynn waiting in the lobby of WCHE. I am holding up a preview of his new book *God and Government*.



After the radio show Lynn and I met with the new Chester County City Solicitor, **Bill Christman**. We spoke to Christman about our concerns regarding the prohibition against the Freethought Society's (FS) participation in the annual Winter holiday display since the passage of Resolution 58-10 in 2010. We asked for the revocation of the Resolution as it prohibits tax-paying citizens from exercising our constitutional right of freedom of expression.

Lynn and I asked that Christman speak to the Chester County Commissioners about our request to participate in the community winter holiday display. During the meeting, I pointed out that in 2007, when the first *Tree of Knowledge* was allowed in the Winter holiday display, there were eight incidents of vandalism, many complaints from religious citizens, and opposition letters-to-the-editor in local newspapers.

In 2008, there were only half that number of vandalism incidents, and letters-to-the-editor were much more tolerant and even in favor of the display.

In 2009, there were no incidents of vandalism and the nontheist winter holiday symbol garnered a lot more support from residents as reflected in letters to the editor printed in *The Daily Local*.

I talked to Christman about the inconvenience and hardship it was to FS to try to participate separately. The FS Human *Tree of Knowledge* events have been conducted in the cold and, because it was a temporary display, no government extension of equality was given.

Lynn talked about how Resolution 58-10 allows the Commissioners to now have exclusive use of the property for the entire holiday season, but when they purchased the displays they wanted for \$1, *The Tree of Knowledge* symbol was rejected. He spoke of fairness, cooperation, freedom of expression and equal representation.

We discussed the letter-writing campaign, a petition that circulated advocating for the *Tree of Knowledge* to be included in the Winter holiday display and that many nontheist representatives have spoken at the Chester County Commissioner's Sunshine Meeting to advocate for the return of *The Tree of Knowledge*. To date, the Commissioners remain unmoved.

We ended our meeting by discussing a recent Pew survey that showed a substantial increase in the percentages of non-affiliated and nontheist citizens in the United States. "Nontheists are citizens of Chester County and are being demonized and treated like second-class citizens," I said.

I added that "The exclusion gives false credibility to the claims that nontheists are unworthy and unwanted. Inclusion also increased the tolerance level of others as demonstrated by the vandalism records and the significant improvement in the tone of published letters-to-the-editor over the years."

Lynn pressed hard on the subject of equality. The nontheist community should be given the same constitutional rights as religious communities.

Especially during the holiday season, we see a preference to, endorsement of, and support for religious symbols only. *The Tree of Knowledge* is as an important a symbol for us as the creche is for the Christians and the menorah is for the Jews. The nontheist symbol, *The Tree of Knowledge*, however, is banned.

As of the printing of this newsletter, no update from Christman has been received.

Lynn is a very popular spokesperson, and it was no surprise to me that he was invited by MSNBC to make a guest appearance in a Philadelphia studio on the afternoon of May 18. Lynn was able to be on the show, live, and still make it to the Ludington Library in time to deliver his speech to FS, "Separation Anxiety: The First Amendment at Risk."

Lynn's presentation was very well attended and many new people arrived to learn more about AU and FS. Lynn talked about same-sex marriage license refusals and the upcoming Supreme Court case regarding marriage equality. He spoke about his experiences regarding memorials on public grounds and interactions he has had with the Religious Right. The audience listened intently as Lynn emphasized the

importance of watching for violations of separation of religion and government.

On Tuesday, May 19, Lynn and I were guests on the one-hour radio show at WDEL. Our host, **Al Mascitti**, is very familiar with separation of religion and government issues. We were pleased that he agreed on the importance of maintaining the wall of separation and Mascitti was a very pleasant interviewer.

Mascitti came to WDEL in 2005 from *The (Wilmington) News Journal*, where he spent 25 years as a reporter, editor and columnist covering everything from restaurants and music to state and local news. His weekday radio show is broadcast from 9:00 AM until noon on WDEL 101.7 FM and 1150 AM.

That night, Lynn spoke at the First Unitarian Church in Wilmington, Delaware. Pictured below at the Unitarian Church are (left to right) **Linda Mahan**, **Al Palmer** (president of the Delaware Association for Humanism), Lynn, **Janice Rael** and I.



Pictured below at the Ludington Library are (left to right) FS board members and officers **Bob Kay**, **Dan Hoffman**, **Patti Butcheck**, Lynn, **Glen Loev**, **Tracy Lockwood**, **Greg White**, and I.



A Quarter-Century of Fighting to Keep God Out of Government

by Tom Melchiorre

The battle cry “for God and Country” has been used throughout history by those seeking victory on every side of every attack, every skirmish, every fight, and every genocide on every continent, as well as in every international, inter-regional, interstate, professional, and/or high school sporting event. So it is most appropriate that the latest book by the **Reverend Barry W. Lynn**, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, appropriates and suitably para-phrases the battle cry to herald and lament the current status of the separation of church and state in the United States.

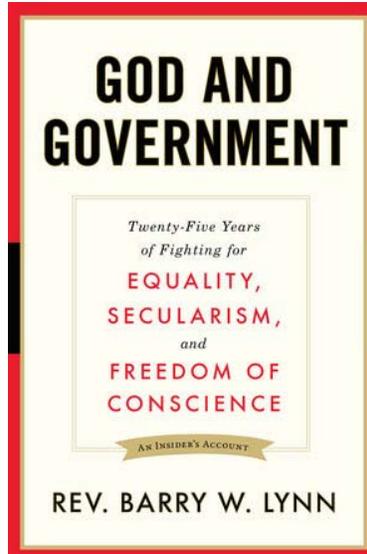
In *God and Country: Twenty-Five Years of Fighting for Equality, Secularism, and Freedom of Conscience*, Lynn has gathered his writings over the past 25 years of being in the trenches, selectively choosing ten subjects to present and chronicle, and interjecting his current thoughts on each subject.

In talking with Lynn at a recent dinner hosted by Freethought Society president **Margaret Downey**, he said he thought this compilation would be an easy task to complete, and told his editor this. As a fellow editor, I had to smile when Lynn said his editor warned him it would instead be a very hard task to do, and Lynn admitted such was indeed the case.

Trying to decide what subjects to cover, then combing through 25 years of writings in numerous publications for chronological consistency, article preference, and logical flow (and add in references to legal issues dating back 50 years), proved a very daunting task. And it has proved an admirable one, as Lynn provides a history that no one but a frontline fighter “in the trenches” can report. Toss in Lynn’s preambles, interjections, and epilogs to each chapter, and you have not only a historical record but a future predicted.

The format to distinguish Lynn’s original writings from his new material is quite simple and doesn’t interrupt or disrupt the reader’s flow: Original writings are in Arial sans-serif font, while his new thoughts and views are in traditional Times Roman typeface.

The ten chapters/subjects/battlefields center on schools and education vouchers, the Religious Right, government-endorsed prayers and religion in politics, the ever-volatile evolution,



Paperback 250 pages, \$19.00
Ebook \$11.99

faith-based funding, religious refusal to follow the rules, and a lot of very interesting subtopics under the various headings. Serious subjects all. Yet, as anyone who has met Lynn can attest, he has a sly sense of humor, possibly due to his seemingly incompatible degrees in both law and theology, and, dare I add, his genetics. As such, he interjects such as his devil horns deem appropriate, right from the first paragraph of his introduction. (Note that sly smile in his photo.) Chapter titles give hint that this is not a dry, academic discussion (which Lynn readily admits it is not), including Chapter 7: *Does the Religious Right Hate Everybody? Answer: Yes*; and my favorite, Chapter 4: *The Religious Right: The More Things Change, The More the Weirdness Continues*. And you must commend the man for answering the question he poses as Chapter 10: *Why Does Anybody Spend Their Adult Life Doing This?*

I’ve deliberately not detailed any particular chapter material, as much of Lynn and his writings are well known. I leave it to the reader to discover the material he chose to highlight his 25 years on the front line.

Keep in mind this book is not, as he says, a comprehensive history of First Amendment matters. It is, however, a nicely-detailed accounting of secular battles won, winning, and winnable in the courts.

Yet the future is not all goody-goody-two-shoes. Lynn also warns — quite direly — of losses, losing ground, and, please excuse the pun, of everything going to hell in a hand basket. And with our lackadaisical compliance, if not approval. He points out the constant barrage of the Roman Catholic hierarchy and the (Protestant) Religious Right pushing for a theocratic, decidedly-undemocratic government that diminishes atheists and others fighting for equal rights, the nonchalance of many millennials on matters other than themselves, and the lack of secular people voting as just a few things that can turn the tide against us.

Lynn is, nonetheless, “guardedly optimistic” of our future, adding, “In the long run, unless we lose momentum, we are going to prevail on preserving and even strengthening the separation of church and state.”

Let us make sure we do not fail.



The Tree of Knowledge Ornament Scan Project

by Margaret Downey

When the Freethought Society (FS) began the *Tree of Knowledge* winter holiday display project in 2007, volunteers made ornaments using color copies of book covers. We received copies of books from authors, publishers, nontheist organizations and individual collectors. Within that first year, *Tree of Knowledge* volunteers had created hundreds of ornaments.

Now that the *Tree of Knowledge* concept has drawn interest from locations all around the world, FS would like to start providing ornaments upon request. The only feasible way to create needed ornaments is to build a database of scanned book cover.

FS needs your help with this important project. We ask that participants submit a high-resolution scan of books you want to see used on the branches of *The Tree of Knowledge*. It's fine if you send a scan of a book cover that we already have. We would like as many scans as possible for our collection.

There are several ways that scans can be delivered for use. One way is to send a scan as an email attachment to: Margaret@FtSociety.org.

Another way is to place your scans on a flash drive and bring it to the next FS gathering. The file will be immediately downloaded on the FS laptop during the event.

Please identify your scan with the same name as the title of the book, so that FS will be able to fulfill ornament requests quickly and easily.

The cost per ornament (postage billed separately) is as follows:

\$1 Extra-small

(Recommended for top tier of a tall tree.)

\$2 Small

(Recommended for top tiers of a tall tree.)

\$3 Medium

(Recommended for use on the upper middle area of a tall tree.)

\$4 Large

(Recommended for use on the lower middle area of a tall tree.)

\$5 Extra-Large

(Recommended for use on the bottom area of a tall tree.)

Do you want a *Tree of Knowledge* ornament kit for your home or organization? Here is an approximate number of ornaments you might need:

10-12' High Tree
100-120 ornaments

6-8' High Tree
50-80 Ornaments

4-5' High Tree
40-50 Ornaments



Pictured above is the 2014 *Tree of Knowledge* that was installed at the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia. This tree has approximately 120 ornaments. It is a 12-foot-high tree. Since the ornaments are laminated, this tree could be used as an outdoor display. If you place a *Tree of Knowledge* in your home, please send us a photo. The Freethought Society is keeping a database of trees in use in an effort to prove that it is an accepted and cherished winter holiday symbol for the nontheist community.

The Freethought Society's 2015 Four-Month Activities Calendar

July 26

On **Sunday, July 26, 2015**, the Philadelphia Coalition of Reason (PhillyCoR.org) is sponsoring the 9th Annual Unity Picnic. The start time is **1:00 PM**. The end time is **5:00 PM**. The picnic will take place rain or shine.

Meet at the Fort Washington State Park, **6036 Joshua Road, Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, 19034**. The event will take place at the **Militia Hill Pavilion** (MHL-1). To find the pavilion, go straight on Joshua Road and turn right through the gate of the park. Stay right at the fork in the road. Parking is on the right side. The pavilion is on the left.

There is a minimum donation of **\$10** per adult (children are free) to cover the cost of burgers, hot dogs, and vegetarian alternatives for the grill, as well as buns and beverages.

Please bring a side dish to share. Use the first letter of your last name for your suggested food contribution:

A-G bring salad or vegetable

H-P bring fruit or dessert

Q-Z bring bread, potato or rice dish

There will be games and activities, but please RSVP! RSVP Email: PhillyReason@gmail.com

August 16

The Freethought Society (FS) Officers and Board of Directors cordially invite you to attend a special fund-raising brunch celebration on **Sunday, August 16, 2015** in honor of FS founder and president **Margaret Downey's** 65th birthday. The event will take place at **11:30 AM** at the **Azie on Main** restaurant, located at **789 E Lancaster Avenue, Villanova, Pennsylvania**. Enjoy great food, "roasts and toasts" presentations, a complimentary Mimosa, souvenir caricatures, and much more!

Brunch tickets will be **\$65** (includes tax and tips) in honor of Downey reaching that milestone number of trips around the sun.

Please note that \$25 of the ticket price may be used as a tax-deductible contribution to FS. The private party room accommodates only 24 guests, so don't miss this the opportunity to participate. Please make your reservation as soon as possible by sending an email request to the FS Vice President Glen Loev at: Glen@FTSociety.org

If you are unable to attend this event, birthday greetings can be sent to the email address above.

100 percent tax-deductible donations to FS honoring Downey's tireless work and advocacy on behalf of nontheist issues can be sent to:

The Freethought Society
P. O. Box 242
Pocopson, PA 19382

September 24

FS is pleased to co-host a speech by **Annie Laurie Gaylor** with the Ethical Humanist Society of Philadelphia (EHSP).

Gaylor is the co-founder and co-president of The Freedom From Religion Foundation, which is a national 501(c)3 educational, legal and activist organization based in Madison, Wisconsin.

Gaylor's presentation "Why Women Need Freedom From Religion" is based on Gaylor's books *Woe to Women: The Bible Tells Me So* and *Women Without Superstition: No Gods — No Masters*. This event will take place on **Thursday, September 24, 2015 at 7:00 PM**. Please join us in the spacious and beautiful auditorium of the EHSP building located at **1906 South Rittenhouse Square Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19103**.

Please note that this presentation takes place just days before the arrival of Pope Francis to Philadelphia. Traffic will be heavy and public transportation will be crowded. Make sure to allow extra time for transportation difficulties that will surely take place that evening.

October 24

FS is happy to host the president of American Atheists (AA), **David Silverman**, on **Saturday, October 24, 2015 at 2:00 PM**. The presentation will take place at the **Free Library of Philadelphia** (meet in the **Montgomery Auditorium**). The library is located at **1901 Vine Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**.

Silverman will speak about his soon-to-be-published book, *Fighting God*, in which he asserts that "firebrand/in-your-face atheism is not only more effective at making change and leading progress, but is also more humanistic than the so-called 'nice guy' approach.

"Religion is a poisonous lie, and needs to be dealt with as such," Silverman says.

Silverman's presentation will include a PowerPoint slide show and is sure to be informative and provocative.

AA is a nonprofit organization dedicated to defending the civil liberties of atheists, and advocates for complete separation of religion and government.



**SEPTEMBER
11-13, 2015**

**HARRISBURG, PA
BEST WESTERN PREMIER
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**TOWARDS A
RATIONAL FUTURE**



PENNSYLVANIA STATE

**atheist/humanist
conference**

SPEAKERS & ENTERTAINMENT

MC: Mark Nebo, Adriana Heguy, Amanda K. Metskas, Aron Ra, Ben Blanchard, Beth Presswood, Chris Johnson, David Fitzgerald, George Hrab, Kevin Davis, Lee Moore, Mandisa Thomas, Matt Dillahunty, Muhammad Syed, Richard Carrier, Sarah Morehead, Seth Andrews, and Teresa MacBain

Featuring performances by Victor Harris, Shelley Segal, Maribeth Mooney and a special viewing of A Better Life with filmmaker Chris Johnson, based on his book. Also, live onstage podcasts from the Barroom Atheists and the Ra-Men.

HELP SUPPORT



AT PASTAHcon
gofundme.com/atheistsfighhunger

**TICKETS &
INFORMATION**
www.atheistpa.org

Facebook: [atheistpa](https://www.facebook.com/atheistpa)
Twitter: [pastahcon](https://twitter.com/pastahcon)





WASHINGTON AREA SECULAR HUMANISTS

Presents:

WASHcon15 **'The Freethought Renaissance'**



October 2-4, 2015
Holiday Inn Downtown
601 Main Street, Lynchburg, VA

Conference Registration & Details: wash.org/washcon15
Hotel Daily Rates: Single/Double Occupancy \$95.00 +Tax
For Hotel Reservations Call: 1-434-528-2500
Use Promotional Code WASH15

**Featuring: Margaret Downey, Dan Barker, Jason Heap,
Tom Flynn, Andy Thomson, Ron Lindsay, Linda LaScola,
Lyz Liddell, Justus Cade, Julian Musolino**

(speakers subject to change)

**Friday, 10/2: Registration 3-8:00 PM, 5:30 Cash Bar, Welcome
Reception and Social**

**Saturday, 10/3: Sessions 8:00 AM-5:45 PM, 6:00 PM Dinner
and Presentation**

Note: Lynchburg, VA has AMTRAK facilities.

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. FS publishes *The Freethought Society News* every other month. The newsletter is delivered as an ezine via email and is complimentary to supporters, donors, like-minded individuals and those who are interested in learning more about freedom of thought.

Monthly events take place in many locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tri-state area of Pennsylvania, Delaware and New Jersey. FS activities and services depend on the financial contributions of supporters. Funds may be sent using this form or via the FS website (www.FtSociety.org/donate/). All contributions to FS are tax-deductible to the fullest extent of the law (Tax ID Number: 23-2738574). Please [donate](#) generously.

Yes! I want to:

become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):
\$30 Individual Supporter \$35 Family Supporter \$20 Student \$1,000 Supporter for a Lifetime

become a "Freethought Star" by setting up an automatic monthly donation to FS from my bank or through PayPal in the amount of (circle one): \$5 \$10 \$15 \$20 \$25 \$30 \$35 \$40 \$45 \$_____ (other per month)

earmark a donation to (insert project, event or committee name): _____

Name: _____

Street Address: _____

City, State and Zip: _____

Email Address: _____

Phone: _____ Cell: _____

Check here if you prefer your sponsorship to remain anonymous.

FS will email a complimentary newsletter to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS newsletter.

Name: _____

Email: _____

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donate. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees were designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We seek to be of assistance to nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas. Please see the FS website or contact FS to volunteer at: volunteers@FtSociety.org.

Anti-Discrimination Educational Committee

(nontheism explained in classroom settings)

Anti-Discrimination Support Network

(assist Openly Secular gathering reports)

Community Outreach

(locate tabling opportunities)

Diversity Outreach Committee

(brainstorming about and developing programs

to appeal to minorities)

Free Speech Zone Committee

(research and implement displays in public venues)

Jump Into the Jean Pool

(collection of jeans for the homeless)

Helping Hands

(provides helpers to seniors and in emergency situations)

Media Outreach Committee

(press coordination and writing press releases)

Membership Committee

(watching for and connecting with possible supporters)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators

(schedule and manage speakers and venues)

Secular Celebrations

(develop and implement new nontheist celebrations)

Soul Searching

(collection of athletic shoes for donating to the homeless)

Speakers Bureau

(provide FS a CV, photo and list of subjects to participate)

Special Events

(coordinate interesting and unique nontheist events)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee

(assist with assemblies and work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee

(make ornaments, find venues, write articles, and support the winter symbol concept nationwide)