



The Freethought Society News

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The Freethought Society and The Secular Coalition for America

by Margaret Downey

The Freethought Society (FS) is a voting member and active affiliate of the Secular Coalition for America (SCA). Thanks to this status FS is always invited to participate in an annual two-day Secular Leadership Summit that took place on the weekend of February 8th and 9th at the Embassy Suites in Alexandria, Virginia. FS board member **Patti Butcheck** attended the Summit with me.

The Secular Leadership Summit began with a Friday night buffet dinner where participants could meet, socialize and share ideas prior to the beginning of the business portion, which officially started on Saturday morning. The Friday social allowed me to bring a guest from my home state of Louisiana. **Owen Bourgeois Rothschild** is a student at George Washington University, where he studies Public Policy Analysis and History Education. Rothschild interned at the office of the American Humanist Association headquartered in Washington, D.C. and expressed interest in learning more about how he can work or volunteer more in the secular community. This young man has a wonderful future ahead of him and I'm proud to have helped to educate him about the value of secularism.

Also joining us for the Friday night meal was sculptor **Zenos Frudakis**. He traveled to Alexandria from his studio in Glenside, Pennsylvania by car so that he could bring a small-scale sample of a Thomas Paine statue, needed for a Saturday presentation, to the Summit. Butcheck, Rothschild, Frudakis and I set up the Thomas Paine display in the meeting room after the Friday night dinner.

The Saturday Summit program began with self-introductions. There were a few new faces this year. The newly-accepted SCA affiliate group Secular Woman (SW) was represented by **Stephanie Zvan** (SW president) and **Monette Richards** (SW vice president). Newly-elected SCA board members **Maggie Ardiente** and **Lori Lipman Brown** were also in attendance. Congratulations to both and to SCA for attracting such talented people to the secular cause.

Representatives from most of the SCA affiliates attended the Summit, including SW, FS, American Atheists, American Ethical Union, American Humanist Association, Atheist Alliance of America, Black Nonbelievers, Camp Quest, Center for Inquiry, Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, Ex-Muslims of North America, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Foundation Beyond Belief, Hispanic American Freethinkers, Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, Recovering from Religion, Secular Student Alliance, Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association.

The Saturday and Sunday Summit agenda was planned by **Debbie Allen**, SCA's Executive Director. She did a fantastic job of combining education with fun activities. For example, we were all asked to write an interesting tidbit about ourselves that nobody in attendance would know. The tidbit was submitted without a name association. Between speakers and workshops one tidbit was read. People tried to guess who authored the tidbit. It was fun to guess who the author was and to hear the full story from the tidbit.

Evan Clark, Secular Student Alliance, conducted an interesting "Getting to Know You" group exercise. Clark's questions were created to discover how strongly each of us felt about certain issues and subjects of concern to the nontheist secular community. Individuals would stand under signs indicating "agree," "somewhat agree," "strongly agree," "disagree," "somewhat disagree," and "strongly disagree."

Gayle Jordan spoke about the efforts being made by Recovering from Religion (RFR). Her presentation reminded us that RFR is a valuable resource for those who are having difficulty leaving their religion. RFR's volunteers are always available to talk to those who might need a friendly ear. RFR also has a referral system in place in the event that someone is in need of professional help.

Joining Frudakis and me to present an update about the Thomas Paine statue project were Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) representatives **Annie Laurie Gaylor** and **Andrew Seidel**. Butcheck assisted us by distributing written information to audience members. I talked passionately about moving forward with installing statues of Paine in both Washington, D.C. and somewhere within the Old City area of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Frudakis explained what goes into the creation of a larger-than-life statue. Gaylor and Seidel talked about the tremendous amount of red tape we face getting a statue installed anywhere within the nation's capitol. On a more positive note, they described our productive Thursday, February 6th meeting with Representative (D-MD) **Jamie Raskin** and conveyed his enthusiasm for the project. We concluded our presentation with a plea to the leaders of groups for help in circulating project details through literature distribution and social media, in addition to financial support. We think the project can be a great unifier for the groups in attendance at the Summit. We were pleased with all the post-presentation positive remarks and several groups immediately expressed a willingness to provide all the support we requested.

The next presentation, entitled "Reason and Liberty," was delivered by **David Boaz**, Executive Vice President of the Cato Institute. Boaz spoke about all the things the Cato Institute might have in common with SCA's affiliates. The discussion portion of his presentation was passionate, with many people bantering and debating a wide variety of issues such as vouchers and the impeachment of President Trump. Boaz's presentation helped participating organizations reach consensus on many issues.

Nick Fish and **Alison Gill** from American Atheists held an informative panel about the results of a survey they recently conducted. They were pleased with the amount of people who participated in the survey. FS helped to increase the number of participants by circulating the survey link to supporters via social media. Nontheist community leaders are looking forward to learning more about the survey results, which will be made available soon.

Zvan and Richards from SW spoke about their progress in writing survey questions concerning how more women can be included in secularism. When the survey is ready, SW hopes to distribute the survey widely. FS stands ready to assist.

Rob Boston, from Americans United for Separation of Church and State, closed the Saturday session with his educational, inspirational and motivational speech entitled "Onward, Militant Secularists: Searching for Optimism Among the Gloom." He provided everyone with an overview of how Christian nationalism rose to prominence in the United States and provided us with suggestions for activism as well as passionate encouragement.

On Sunday morning, the last day of the Summit, participants were treated to legislative updates provided by **Rachel Deitch**, from the American Humanist Association, and **Mark Dann**, from FFRF. Lobbying efforts are always of great

importance to FS and the legislative information was most helpful in setting priorities both nationally and locally. Please look for more Lobby Day information in upcoming issues of *The Freethought Society News*.

Legal updates were provided by Gill from American Atheists, **Izzy Oldfield** from the American Humanist Association, **Nick Little** from the Center for Inquiry, and **Rebecca Markert** from FFRF. The most difficult hurdle for initiating legal challenges is finding plaintiffs. Citizens harmed by violations of discrimination and separation of religion and government must endure many hardships. FS will consult with and support plaintiffs. FS has been involved in two lawsuits and has experience in what is needed to become a plaintiff and in remaining strong through the process.

Noelle George, from Foundation Beyond Belief, provided an overview of the annual Week of Action projects. FS had four Week of Action events planned. Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic all events had to be cancelled.

In the afternoon session, **Marla Bobowick** from Bobowick Consulting provided information about board responsibilities and expectations. My takeaway from the presentation is that we need more FS board meetings and perhaps more board members. Please let FS know if you are interested in serving FS as a board member by contacting us at info@FtSociety.org.

The theme of "Get Out the Vote" was presented by **Kevin Bolling** from the Secular Student Alliance (SSA). There will be many efforts to not only get out the vote but to also provide transportation to the polls. FS is working with SSA in Pennsylvania and California to volunteer for this important effort.

The last presentation of the Summit was about fundraising. It was presented by Ardiente, who is the Director of Development at the national headquarters of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG). Ardiente provided some terrific ideas to help the groups return to their offices with additional tools for raising much-needed operational funds. She encouraged us all to get creative. I found her advice very helpful.

Those who could stay in Washington, D.C. after the conclusion of the Summit were invited to participate in a Monday, February 10th SCA Lobby Day. I participated, meeting with congressional representatives in the offices of Senator **Tim Kaine** of Virginia, Senator **Bob Casey** of Pennsylvania, Senator **Pat Toomey** of Pennsylvania, the Congressional Hispanic Caucus, and the Congressional Freethought Caucus.

During the visits to the offices of Casey and Toomey, I discussed the Do No Harm Act, discrimination against nontheists, concerns about blasphemy laws, and bigotry against nontheists by the Boy Scouts of America as well as the Federal funding they receive. The Do No Harm Act amends the Religious Freedom Restoration Act to ensure that no one can use their religion to violate another citizen's fundamental civil and legal rights. It ensures that publicly funded services are available to all members of the public.

The Congressional Freethought Caucus hosted Summit attendees for almost two hours wherein they asked about our concerns and priorities. The session was chaired by Representative **Jared Huffman**. Six out of the twelve members of the Caucus attended the productive meeting. I was impressed with each member of the Caucus and I hope to see the participation of more legislators in the future. ☺

Photos From the 2020 Secular Leadership Summit



The photo at left was taken shortly after a meeting about the Thomas Paine statue project. Pictured in the office of Representative **Jamie Raskin** (left to right) are **Andrew Seidel**, **Annie Laurie Gaylor**, Raskin, **Margaret Downey**, **Zenos Frudakis**, **Mark Dann**, and **Dan Barker**.

The meeting was very productive. We presented our plans which included three budget samples, locations that might be possible, and a brief history of the first Washington, D.C. Thomas Paine statue effort that took place in the 1990s.

Raskin is a strong advocate of this project.



Pictured left during the 2020 Secular Leadership Summit are **Patti Butcheck**, **Debbie Allen**, and **Downey**.

Butcheck is the Freethought Society secretary, manages the website, and handles most of the social media.

Pictured right are **Rachel Deitch**, **Downey**, **Dann**, and **Hypatia Alexander** as they meet for a chat with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus.



Pictured right are representatives from American Atheists, American Ethical Union, American Humanist Association, Atheist Alliance of America, Black Nonbelievers, Camp Quest, Center for Inquiry, Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, Ex-Muslims of North America, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Freethought Society, Foundation Beyond Belief, Hispanic American Freethinkers, Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers, Recovering from Religion, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, Secular Woman, Society for Humanistic Judaism, and the Unitarian Universalist Humanist Association.



Lobbying Insights

by Margaret Downey

There is an art to lobbying and the Freethought Society's (FS) affiliation with the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) has connected me to many lobbying experts. This year I was pleased to lobby with and learn from **Mark Dann, Rachel Deitch, Andrew Hulett, Sarah Levin, and Izzy Oldfield**. Each of these lobbyists participated in the February 10, 2020 SCA Lobby Day. Basic lobbying guidelines were distributed ahead of time and I thought it would be interesting to share a few of those guidelines in this article.

To speed things along at congressional building security stops, we were asked to avoid wearing a lot of metal such as jewelry or heavy belt buckles. While we waited in line; we removed our coats, readied our bags for possible inspection, and took metal objects from our pockets to place in a small bin. The process was very similar to airport security measures.

We were told to anticipate a lot of walking and to wear comfortable shoes. There is often a lot of stair climbing. Building elevators are usually crowded and not immediately available.

Professional yet comfortable lightweight clothing was recommended. February weather in Washington D.C is usually unpredictable, so layering clothing is best. Some buildings may get overly warm and some may get overly chilly.

We were warned to not take an antagonistic position or get into an argument. If there is an obvious disagreement, it's fine to politely and simply say I have "a different perspective."

Everyone was reminded to mute and put away their cell phones while visiting congressional offices. Most visits lasted approximately 20 minutes. It's highly unlikely that lobbyists actually will meet with a legislator, so we were given some pointers about meeting with staffers. After a brief 1-2 minute introduction (AKA an "elevator speech"), I found that the best way to begin a meeting was to ask what projects and priorities were being addressed by the legislator. I'm looking for a connection and I'm interested in learning more about the legislator. This type of opening worked extremely well with each of my legislative visits during the SCA Lobby Day.

I listened carefully and noted what I might want to talk about from a secular point of view. For instance, when I visited the office of Senator **Tim Kaine** (D-VA) with Dann and **Hypatia Alexander**, the staffer told us that an office concern is prison reform. That presented me with an opportunity to talk about the FS Prison Library Literature Placement Project and the prisoner letter database. I also talked about the complaints we have received from prisoners about the overt promotion of religion and the fact that nontheist prisoners are not being given alternatives to required religious 12-step programs. The staffer took notes and I hope the messages will be conveyed to Senator Kaine.

All the people who were lobbying prepared and practiced a personal story about being a nontheist in the United States. This is a chance to bring up issues of importance. The story and the issue may lead to an actual "ask" of the legislator in regards to legislation, consideration and follow through.

In my case I always talk about discrimination at the hands of the world's largest youth group — The Boy Scouts of America (BSA). While BSA now accepts gays, girls and transgender applicants, they continue to discriminate against nontheists. Since BSA holds a Congressional Charter to

educate the public about Scoutcrafting — not teach religion — I strongly emphasize that no federal taxpayer money or gratuities should be allotted to an organization that blatantly excludes a large segment of the population.

I never leave a meeting without highlighting the known percentages of people who consider themselves non-religiously affiliated. The below Pew survey link reveals that 33% of the religiously unaffiliated "do not believe in God." Interestingly, the highest number of religiously unaffiliated are in the age range of 30-49. Details can be found at the below link:

<https://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/religious-tradition/unaffiliated-religious-nones/>

I am always prepared to convey Pew survey results and details because it emphasizes how they should value what we say during Lobby Day visits. I bring along printed documentation just in case evidence of what I convey is called for.

I also bring written materials about FS to highlight what we do as a 501(c)3 educational organization. I want the legislator to be left with a good impression of nontheists.

At the end of a meeting, it's advisable to make an ask of the legislator. Besides requesting that the legislator does not allow BSA federal funding of any type, I ask for support of the Do No Harm Act⁽¹⁾ and assistance with preventing the passage of any blasphemy laws. If the legislator is not already a member of The Congressional Freethought Caucus⁽²⁾ I ask that they consider joining.

One of my favorite visits during the SCA Lobby Day was a stop at the office of Representative **Joaquin Castro** (D-TX). His office is the headquarters of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. I talked about my Hispanic background and told the staffer about the Secular Day of the Dead created in 2014 by **Victoria de la Torre** and me. I had the Secular Day of the Dead Toolkit with me and as soon as the staffer saw it she asked if she could have it. I was thrilled with the interest she showed and told her about the pride we have in seeing the event replicated all around the country. I followed up with a "thank you for your time" email and sent her a link to the National Public Radio program about the 2018 Secular Day of the Dead that took place in Los Angeles, California.

One of the professional lobbying suggestions included watching for opportunities to have a follow-up visit to the office of the legislator. I was happy to have had that chance with the Congressional Hispanic Caucus. ⚙

(1) *The Do No Harm Act is a bill that makes The Religious Freedom Restoration Act inapplicable to: terms requiring goods, services, functions, or activities to be performed or provided to beneficiaries of government contracts, grants, cooperative agreements, or awards; or denials of a person's full and equal enjoyment of a government-provided good, service, benefit, facility, privilege, advantage, or accommodation.*

(2) *The Congressional Freethought Caucus provides a forum to all Senators and Members of Congress. Its goals are to promote public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values; protect the constitutional principle of the separation of religion and government; oppose discrimination; and to champion the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide.*

Southern California Local Leadership Summit

by Victoria de la Torre

The Freethought Society (FS) has strong local presence from coast to coast. As part of the Southern California region's active secular groups, FS was invited to attend the 2020 Southern California Secular Leadership Summit that took place in Fallbrook, California, about an hour's drive north of San Diego where I reside. As a board member of FS, I was excited to attend the February 28-March 1 Summit.

The Summit began Friday afternoon and immediately I felt the inviting sense of community and unity. We were hosted in a spacious rented house overlooking beautiful rolling hillsides, which included a neighboring vineyard. The venue itself set the tone for an insightful and visionary weekend.

I was happy to have time to get acquainted with different leaders and representatives from secular groups in Southern California. The groups participating, in addition to FS, were South Orange County Humanists; Atheists and Agnostics; Atheists United; Secular Latinos of San Gabriel Valley; Backyard Skeptics; Orange County Humanists; Leisure World Humanists; Inland Empire Atheists, Agnostics and Humanists; University of Southern California Secular Student Alliance; Humanist Society of Santa Barbara; Atheists United; Sunday Assembly Los Angeles; Humanist Community of Ventura County; Santa Clarita Atheists and Freethinkers; Sunday Assembly San Diego; and The Humanistic Jewish Community of San Diego.

I was pleased to learn about many small groups that sometimes go unseen — yet they provide so much to the grassroots landscape of the secular community. By the end of the first night we all had a chance to get to know each other through conversation, brainstorming and the use of ice breaker exercises. It was clear we all had similar goals and expectations in regard to how we want to collaborate and move forward with a united secular movement in California.

During that first day, we tossed around different ideas including what we wanted to accomplish during the Summit. On the second day we hit the ground running early (after enjoying a light breakfast). **Evan Clark** led the agenda and engaged us in group exercises aimed at brainstorming specific goals so that we could later address them within smaller groups. Since FS is also based in Orange County, I decided to group with **Bruce Gleason** (Backyard Skeptics) and **Dave Rice** (Orange County Humanists). With so many issues at the forefront of the secular movement we were encouraged to figure out what would be most important to our particular community. The consensus was that climate change and homelessness were definitely issues that needed to be addressed. Surely an atheist presence on these issues would be great. We all agreed, however, that the need for a secular voice in government is vital and necessary.

Another aspect of the Summit that we focused on was the need to work as a more integrated movement, as opposed to just working towards similar goals. In other words, actually working with each other rather than supporting the goals of others from a distance. There have been so many times when I hear of a speaker coming to town the week or month of the scheduled appearance. I certainly want to know beforehand! I could have helped to schedule those people in other venues and I'm sure speakers would prefer to have additional presentation opportunities as they consider their long-distance travel plans. Unfortunately, many secular groups do not share speaker resources/contact information. It was a point made by everyone and we all agreed to improve our communication and share resources. We are stronger as a movement when we collaborate.

During the weekend I was concerned that we would address secular goals in a general sense, and return from the Summit with a "to do" list that would likely not get accomplished. Instead, I was happy to find ourselves making immediate plans to collaborate. Sunday Assembly San Diego, for example, joined the Humanistic Jewish Community of San Diego for group collaboration. Agreeing that homeless outreach is an immediate concern that they both want to address, they decided on a day and location to go forward with community outreach. Even better, the Humanistic Jewish Community of San Diego offered their venue.

One of the highlights of the Summit was a discussion with **Bill Zuersher**, author of *Seeing Through Christianity*. His 2016 book examines Christianity's core beliefs and fallacies. Zuersher was a wonderful addition to the weekend. He said that we should focus on getting involved politically in order to become a lasting presence.

I hope future secular Summits will continue to invite not just local secular groups and their leaders but also accomplished authors such as Zuersher. I'm inspired to read his book now that I've met him.

The Summit was a major accomplishment for the secular community, not only for FS but for the movement as a whole. I left the summit feeling more energized than ever.

At times nonprofits are overworked and overwhelmed just keeping up with everyday office duties. Preparing for special events, hosting speakers, and conducting regular meetings make it difficult to stay connected with other groups. The Summit helped me focus on what I want to add to the secular community and I'm more energized to be a West Coast representative for FS. In that capacity I plan to help find and organize co-hosting opportunities. I'm sure there will be many more collaborative future events which will help all secular groups shine in sunny southern California. We are all stronger together! ✨



Victoria de la Torre has been a Freethought Society board member for four years. She is also a Secular Officer and the mother of two young children.



Patriotism

by Herb Silverman



I could not have had a more patriotic beginning, or so I was taught to believe. I was born on Flag Day (June 14) in 1942, during World War II, at Liberty Hospital in Philadelphia, birthplace of both the nation and the flag purportedly designed by **Betsy Ross**. I wanted to believe family members who told me that flags were hung in honor of my birthday. My first public speech was at a fourth-grade Flag Day ceremony. I was chosen to read my essay “What the American Flag Means to Me.” In that essay, I wrote about looking at the flag when *The Star-Spangled Banner* was sung at major league baseball games, hoping I would one day be a player on that field. I’m pretty sure my essay was picked because I happened to mention Flag Day was my birthday. Or maybe the other essays were even worse.

My views on patriotism in general, and Flag Day in particular, have changed considerably over the years. Suffice it to say that the anniversary of my birth has become a day when opportunistic politicians regularly attempt to take away freedoms for which our flag is supposed to stand. On my twelfth birthday, President **Dwight D. Eisenhower** signed into law the addition of “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance, saying, “From this day forward, the millions of our schoolchildren will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural schoolhouse, the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty.” President Eisenhower made no mention of the Constitution during this Flag Day ceremony in 1954 because the Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office and says nothing about any Almighty’s.

The words “under God” were inserted into the Pledge of Allegiance at the height of the McCarthy Era to distinguish patriotic Americans from “godless Communists.” This melding of God and Country turned a secular pledge into a religious one, and caused me to feel less patriotic when I no longer believed we were under any gods.

In addition to my problem conflating the Pledge of Allegiance and patriotism, I’m also bothered by linking patriotism with standing and singing *The Star-Spangled Banner* and deifying the American flag. I applauded football players who exercised their free-speech right to kneel during *The Star-Spangled Banner* in protest of racism, despite disapproval of many fans and President **Donald J. Trump**. Those who object call such a protest “unpatriotic” because this song is supposed to unite us. But there’s a little-known reason why we only sing the first stanza of the song: Composer **Francis Scott Key** was a pro-slavery racist. The third stanza decries the runaway slaves working for the British army and openly celebrates the murder of such former slaves.

I rarely agreed with former Supreme Court **Justice Antonin Scalia**, but he did the right thing in his key vote in the decision that flag burning is constitutionally-protected speech under the First Amendment. Criminalizing flag burning, however unpatriotic most Americans consider it to be, is an unconstitutional attack on our cherished freedom of speech.

Standing and singing *The Star-Spangled Banner*, deifying the American flag, and reciting the Pledge of Allegiance are examples of symbolic patriotism. What we need more of is substantive patriotism to improve our country in tangible

ways. This could include serving on local school boards, volunteering at soup kitchens, staying informed on issues, voting, doing what we can about climate change, and criticizing our government in the hope of improving it. Symbolic patriotism is easy, and often mindless. Substantive patriotism is what can make a country great.

Our public schools train students to salute the flag and say the Pledge of Allegiance whether they understand it or not, because simply regurgitating the Pledge daily is supposed to make them more patriotic. That strategy succeeds if patriotism just means obediently following orders of those in power. Discussions about the Pledge would be a significant improvement over mindless repetition.

Here’s how I would like to see public school teachers turn the Pledge of Allegiance into a meaningful patriotic exercise. First, assign each student to write a short essay on one of ten segments in the Pledge. For example:

1. I pledge allegiance (What does it mean to pledge, and what is allegiance?)
2. To the flag (Why to a flag? Should it be to someone or something else?)
3. Of the United States of America (How united are we, and what is America?)
4. And to the republic for which it stands (What’s a republic, and why are we one?)
5. One nation (In what sense are we one nation?)
6. Under God (Are we all under God, under the same God, and the only such nation?)
7. Indivisible (How are we indivisible, and what might divide us?)
8. With liberty (What does it mean to have liberty?)
9. And justice (Do we all have equal access to it, and does it ever conflict with liberty?)
10. For all (Does that mean all people or only American citizens?)

Next, have students read their essays, followed by class discussions. Then encourage each student to rewrite the Pledge in a way that is more meaningful to him or her. Instead of group recitation then listen to and discuss their original pledges.

The “under God” discussions would undoubtedly be the most heated, because our “indivisible” nation is divided about God. Some students might choose to eliminate “under God,” while others might change it to “under Jesus,” “under Allah,” “under the Constitution,” or even “under Canada.”

Many who engage in this exercise might conclude that the government should not tell us we are one nation under God any more than it should tell us we are one nation under no gods. Regardless of personal religious beliefs, students ought to learn about the importance of religious liberty and why it is threatened when the government endorses any religious view.

Teachers could parse the Pledge of Allegiance in other ways or ask different questions. But one thing for sure is that their students would learn and understand the Pledge of Allegiance better than previous generations have, whether

“under God” or not. Starting the school day with discussions about our Bill of Rights would also be educational and might lead to informed, active citizenship. Understanding our Constitution and working to make our country better is patriotic.

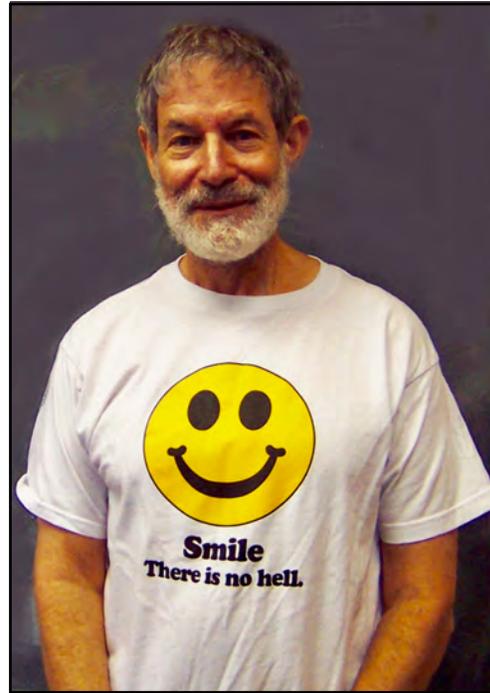
Although we tend to deify our founders and hold them up as role models, we act more like them when we question the old order and try to improve it. Our founders wrote the world’s first secular constitution, and they also established a method for future generations to amend it when needed. Thinking, questioning, and trying to improve our country is definitely patriotic — a lot more so than merely reciting pledges and prayers or waving flags.

I’m often reminded of the movie *Head of State*, in which **Chris Rock** is running for president against a candidate who ends all his speeches with “God bless America, and nowhere else!” I can no longer hear “God bless America” from a politician without thinking of that three-word ending. Along with this notion comes “American Exceptionalism,” equating the country with the biblical city on the hill. Why do some Americans want all countries to emulate America but create so many barriers for those desperately seeking a better life in America?

I recognize how fortunate I am to have been born in a country and family where I have had ample opportunities to attain a decent education and standard of living. What should we do about those to whom much is not given, whether born in this or another country? Though there are no easy answers, I wish Americans would be more charitable in understanding the plight of illegal immigrants and our least fortunate citizens. It is through pure chance of birth that many of us, myself

included, are not sneaking into other countries to find safety or work so that we can feed our families.

In recent years, our Statue of Liberty seems to have lost its former role as an inspiration for the United States. To me, it’s patriotic to act on the statue’s words: “Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me, I lift my lamp beside the golden door!”



Herb Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*.

If interested in making a purchase, please order through the [Amazon Smiles](#) program to benefit the Freethought Society.



Micki Carr



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Kazakhstan Embassy Roundtable on Freedom of Religion or Belief

by Alan Gold

On Tuesday, February 11th 2020 I was pleased to attend a roundtable discussion for invited Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) at the Republic of Kazakhstan's Embassy in Washington, D.C. This meeting was designed to be a small event with only six non-Kazakhs invited to attend.

At the beginning of the meeting guests were asked to introduce themselves. I was proud to present myself as a Freethought Society (FS) board member, a member of American Atheists, and a supporter of Humanists International. This information provided me with an opportunity to draw attention to my being a nontheist, but I was there to learn and identify paths in which we could work together for civil and human rights.

Seven senior members of the Kazakhstan government and those responsible for religious policy were in attendance. **Marat Azilkhanov**, Vice Minister of Information and Social Development for the Republic of Kazakhstan, gave a brief presentation on Kazakhstan's proposed roadmap on freedom of religion or belief. The remainder of the time was open for questions as well as discussions.

Kazakhstan's Ambassador, **Erzhan Kazykhanov** answered many of the questions. Simultaneous interpretations via headphones were available in English and Russian for ease of understanding.

They listened and seemed eager to further their efforts to separate religion and government, to accept and accommodate religions not already included in the 18 government-approved belief systems, to accept nontheists, and to proudly proclaim the progressive leadership they have shown in that part of the world. Kazakhstan improved their views on women's rights and religious tolerance. They have also passed laws prohibiting child brides and wife beating.

I truly felt that my input was making a difference in their thoughts and future actions. These types of roundtables, with the people who matter and are concerned, are monumental breakthroughs for the United Nations NGO Committee for Freedom of Religion or Belief. I am a board member of this NGO. The Freedom of Religion or Belief and many other similar NGOs have been working for decades to implore countries throughout the world to be kinder to their citizens of minority religions and nontheist viewpoints. Until now, however, acceptance had been getting worse, not better.

I didn't know what to expect when attending this significant, high-level meeting concerning the advancement of views and actions of the nation of Kazakhstan. I couldn't help but recall the 2006 film *Borat*, in which **Sacha Baron Cohen** depicts Kazakhstan as an over-the-top backwards cesspool of misogynistic sectarian hatred energized by rabid anti-Semitism. Nonetheless *Borat* prompted tourism, which infused much-needed cash into the Kazakhstan economy. In 2012 the foreign ministry thanked Cohen for promoting the country and increasing tourism. Ironically, when the movie first appeared in theaters the government of Kazakhstan banned it.

Even though I lived and worked in central Asia in the early 1970s, I never visited the country. Kazakhstan is bordered by



The Republic of Kazakhstan's Embassy located in Washington, D. C.

Russia on the north, China on the east, and Europe on the west. It is the largest landlocked country in the world. The joke in Kazakhstan is that there are more horses than women in the population — and there are!

I may have been the only Secular Jew and the only atheist present of the twenty-three attendees who were mostly Kazakhs. My questions about treatment of those groups in their country were met with kind and thoughtful responses. I decried blasphemy laws, and they said that the populace was sensitive to criticism of their religion, 74 percent of which is Islam. Kazakhstan leaders are concerned that tinkering with

blasphemy laws in an Islamic majority state is dangerous for any politician to try. Consequently, they will not move quickly to change laws of this sort.

Azilkhanov said six small Jewish synagogues in their country practice their religion without fear. It was also disclosed that 15 percent of the country identify as agnostic or atheist. In the past, the number of declared atheists was much higher because the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics actively discouraged religious affiliation.

I made many friends attending this meeting. All the Americans in attendance have been invited to several future events that the Kazakhstan embassy is sponsoring. I look forward to reminding them that nontheists are people worthy of their respect and appreciation.



Pictured above left is Freethought Society board member **Alan Gold** personally introducing himself to the Kazakhstan Ambassador to the United States, **Erzhan Kazykhanov**.

David A. Henley, Thomas Paine Advocate, Dies at age 81

On Sunday, March 1, 2020, **David A. Henley** died of myelofibrosis, an uncommon type of bone marrow cancer. Henley was 81 years old. He proudly served his country in the United States Army (1959-1961). His burial is scheduled to take place at the South West Veterans Cemetery in Dublin, Virginia.

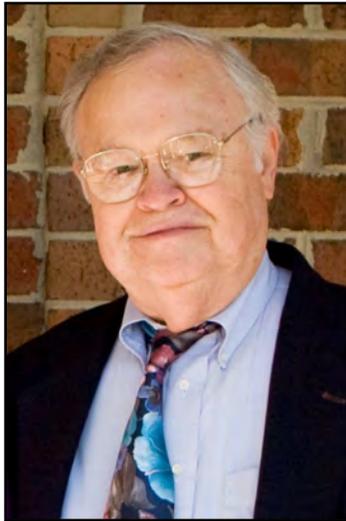
Henley was preceded in death by his parents, five sisters, and two brothers. Those left to cherish his memory are his loving wife of 54 years, **Nancy Thomas Henley**, and many loving nieces, nephews, extended family, and friends.

Henley graduated from both the Virginia Commonwealth University and Duquesne University with degrees in Sociology and Existential Phenomenology. He taught part-time through the community college system in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for several years. He also worked for several years at the Pennsylvania Human Relations Department.

Henley was an avid collector of books and memorabilia on various subjects. One of his main interests was collecting historical information about freedom of thought. He became an expert and scholar of historical figures such as **Thomas Paine**, **Lavinia Ellen “Vinnie” Ream Hoxie**, **Mary Wollstonecraft**, **Robert Green Ingersoll**, and **Moncure Daniel Conway**. His interest in the work and life legacy of these important people garnered many speaking invitations throughout Henley’s life.

Henley was particularly proud to have organized and implemented an exhibit of Ream’s work at the Arts Club of Washington. Her famous white marble statue of United States President **Abraham Lincoln** is located in the United States Capitol rotunda.

In 1987, Henley was a guest speaker at The Visionaries of World Peace: Thomas Paine Colloquium held at the United Nations building in New York City, New York. He has spoken about Paine in Montreal, Canada and in New Rochelle, New York.



Perhaps Henley’s greatest accomplishment to honor Paine was on October 25, 1994, when President William J. Clinton signed S.J. Resolution 227 into public law. The joint resolution approved “...the location of a Thomas Paine Memorial and a World War II Memorial in the Nation’s Capital.”

The Resolution’s approval was a culmination of work that began in 1990. Henley collected hundreds of letters of endorsement from businesses, authors, professors, schools, politicians, labor unions, nonprofit groups, and individuals.

The Freethought Society’s Thomas Paine Memorial Committee (TPMC) has adopted Henley’s quest to locate a statue of Paine in Washington, D.C. soon. Please see the below donation form to learn how you can help bring

this project and Henley’s dream to fruition.

Henley devoted his passion and knowledge about Paine to the Thomas Paine Society and TPMC. Henley worked with TPMC for over 25 years helping to plan events.

It was also important for Henley to honor Ingersoll’s legacy. He often donated items to the Robert Green Ingersoll Birthplace Museum. Among the excellent items featuring Ingersoll are an original print of a *Puck* cover; several photographs of 19th century cartoons; one silver spoon of an **Otto Wettstein** Ingersoll set; a small Ingersoll autograph with the sentiment “A slave is less than a man — a master less than a slave,” dated August 19, 1876; a Civil War photo of Ingersoll and Captain **William McClure** in uniform; and a mounted **Rose Shuman** bronze relief of Ingersoll’s profile.

TPMC inherited items from Henley’s vast Ingersoll and Paine collection. The items will be either donated to appropriate museums or will be used to raise funds for the Paine statue project. Henley will be remembered fondly and given proper recognition when a statue of Paine is finally unveiled.

Donation Form for a Thomas Paine Statue

Yes! I would like to donate to the project. Please process the following financial donation for:

Name (first and last): _____

Street Address: _____

City, State, and Zip Code: _____

Phone Number: _____ Email Address: _____

Note: Any donation amount is appreciated! Charge cards can be used at: FtSociety.org Gifts mentioned below are limited and will be mailed safely via USPS.

For a donation of **\$50** or more, receive ten Thomas Paine lapel pins.

For a donation of **\$100** or more, receive a CD of the writings of Thomas Paine, and ten Thomas Paine lapel pins.

For a donation of **\$200** or more, receive a CD of the writings of Thomas Paine, ten Thomas Paine lapel pins, and a color portrait of Thomas Paine suitable for framing.

For a donation of **\$300** or more, receive a CD of the writings of Thomas Paine, ten Thomas Paine lapel pins, a color portrait of Thomas Paine suitable for framing, and a Thomas Paine collectible book.

I do not need a gift. I am, however, donating the following amount to the Freethought Society’s Thomas Paine statue project: \$_____

Pass Over, Please!

by Glen Loev

One of the ways people have found to reduce their anxiety caused by the current spread of COVID-19 is the sharing of funny, clever jokes and videos online. Doing so can be a distraction and an easy way to keep in touch with family and friends, close and distant.

I have been sharing jokes and parody videos related to the coronavirus here in the United States and also with family and friends overseas, including many in Israel. Israelis in general love good, biting satire. They, as we, have plenty of material to work with, given the current political situations in both countries!

One Facebook-style post that I got from Israel asked (in Hebrew) “At what point in this plague are we supposed to smear blood on the doorposts of our houses?” This referenced, of course, the biblical story of the Israelites being instructed to smear lamb’s blood on the doorframe of the entrance to their houses, so that when the “Angel of Death” would come to deliver the 10th plague to the Egyptians it would pass over (get it?) the houses of the Israelites, and spare their first born.

Is it anything more than a coincidence that the rapid spread of the coronavirus is happening shortly before the Jewish holiday of Passover? I certainly don’t think so. Still, the timing has generated some interesting memes, or if you prefer, black humor.

I shared the (translated) “plague” post from Israel with a local friend who is an evangelical Christian. He reciprocated with a comic article from a conservative satirical site called the Babylon Bee. In their version on the same theme, the “Angel of Coronavirus” will spare infection from homes where the doorposts had been painted with Chick-fil-A sauce. The post is a good one — funny and satirical — so if you’re interested, here’s the link:

<https://babylonbee.com/news/coronavirus-passes-over-houses-with-cfa-sauce/>

What to make of this? Not much, really. I just found it interesting how religious/biblical memes can be repurposed as satire.

May COVID-19 pass over all the readers of this ezine, their families, friends and neighbors. Be sure to post the red capital “A” signifying “atheist” on your doorposts...but only if you happen to like the esthetic.



The Freethought Society COVID-19 Message

On Monday, March 23, 2010, the following announcement was sent to the online subscribers of *The Freethought Society News*:

Dear Freethought Society Supporters,

We hope this message finds you healthy and as happy as possible following “stay home” recommendations. Based on recommendations from city, state, and federal health officials, the Freethought Society canceled or postponed all of our major events and public gatherings for several months.

Cancellations or postponements include all Freethought Society community service activities, meetings, social occasions, and the Secular Week of Action events that were planned. Please note the dates and event descriptions below that are now officially canceled or postponed:

April 4th

Postponed: The Freethought Society’s 3-D West Chester, Pennsylvania social event

April 18th

Canceled: Freethought Society tabling at the 2020 Lansdale International Spring Festival

April 23rd

Postponed: The Andrew Seidel presentation at the Ludington Library

April 28th

Postponed: Working at the Philabundance Hunger Relief Center in coordination with the East Brandywine Baptist Church

May 3rd

Postponed: Feeding the homeless and hungry in coordination with Muslims Serve at the Philadelphia Hub of Hope

While we wait for quarantines to be lifted, the editors of *The Freethought Society News* ask that you consider writing your rejection of religion journey story. We love to print these stories. Even if you don’t consider yourself a writer, we will work with you to make your story something you can be proud to publish.

Journey stories will help build a better understanding of the nontheist community and will serve as an educational tool for those who are questioning their religion. The delivery of facts, demanding of evidence, and debating claims of the supernatural pale in comparison to the emotional connection we can develop through our story telling. For submission details, please see the following link:

<https://www.ftsociety.org/menu/journey-stories/>

Please consider participating in this collection of journey stories project while you wait out the COVID-19 epidemic. In the meantime, please abide by all the CDC recommendations.

The Freethought Society Board of Directors
and Editorial Team

How I Got Here

by Jim Phynn

I was born in March 1972, the youngest of three children, to **Al Goldman** and **Brenda Goldman**, a conservative Jewish couple in the Philadelphia suburbs. In accordance with Jewish tradition, I was named for someone who had recently died. In this case it was my mother's father, who had died approximately two years earlier. His death occurred shortly after my mother had a stillborn baby eight months into her third pregnancy. The circumstances of my birth, in my mother's words, were literally intended to demonstrate that she could still create something.

I was apparently a very shy baby. The one exception to this, however, was with my mother's Aunt Gertrude who was her father's sister. Although I have no memory of this, the first time I met her I ran up to her and gave her a big hug. No doubt many people who would have witnessed this event would have attributed it to some supernatural intervention. I interpret it as me coming out of my shell.

As I grew older my parents sent me to Hebrew School, and I readily confess that I enjoyed what I learned there. When I was eight years old, I told my parents that I wanted to be a rabbi when I grew up.

Looking back on those Hebrew School days, I recognize two things that stand out: First, I liked learning in general. I read a lot and I enjoyed finding connections between things from a young age. Second, I had an aptitude for languages that persists to this day. One of my favorite things about Hebrew School, undoubtedly, was the fact that I was being taught a different language.

One of the things that most resonated with me as a part of my religious education was the Ten Days of Repentance, the ten days that begin with the holiday of Rosh Hashanah and end with Yom Kippur. According to the mythology as I was taught it, these are the only days in which we have any control over our fates; how we would act during these ten days would have a direct impact on the good and bad things that would happen over the course of the rest of the following year. "Your fate is sealed," I remember Mrs. Feldman telling our class in a somewhat ominous voice after Yom Kippur one year.

It thus struck me as unusual or discordant when Aunt Gertrude died of a massive heart attack on September 28, 1984, right in the middle of the Ten Days of Repentance. I was twelve years old and had just started the Hebrew School year that would culminate in my bar mitzvah. How was it possible, then, that if this was the only time of the year when god (or as I wrote it at the time, "G-d") allowed us any control over our lives that she would die at all, much less in this manner at this time?

The short answer, of course, is that it's not reasonable, or just, or right. I began thinking about other things I had been taught. God telling Abraham to sacrifice his only son to prove his faith, only to have god "stay his hand" at the last minute. Nobody ever talked about how his son felt about all of this. The logistical impossibilities of Noah's ark and the complete lack of justice of killing everyone (and everything) else. The entire Exodus story.

By the time my bar mitzvah came around six months later I was completely disillusioned with the religion in which I was raised. Even so, I think I still put on a good show for my friends and family in attendance that day.

It was clear to me that if any religion had the "right" story to tell it wasn't Judaism. Over the next few years I looked into a lot of other religions in hopes of finding something more plausible and believable. I looked into Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Paganism, and more branches of Christianity than I care to admit. I walked away from all of them with the same answer: they weren't right either.

The most frustrating part of all of this, to me, was what was obvious: that religious leaders trying to tell you how to please their gods are little more than conmen (and yes, they are mostly but not universally men). They don't know any better than anyone else. That may be why, shortly after I graduated from college, I briefly dated a girl who told me that she had never met anyone with so much anger directed at organized religion as I felt.

If someone has honest doubts about the teachings of various religions there are a lot of words they can use to describe themselves. I embrace almost all of them for myself:

- I'm an atheist when I say I don't believe in god.
- I'm an agnostic when I say that there are things about the universe and our place in it that we don't (and possibly can't) know.
- I'm an anti-theist when I oppose harm done in the name of religion.
- I'm a freethinker when I describe my own personal journey. No one can or should tell me what to think.
- I'm an apostate when I describe Judaism as a coat that doesn't fit any more. Sure, I'll return to a synagogue when a family member needs me to (bar mitzvahs, weddings, funerals, etc), but I don't truly feel comfortable there.
- I'm a heretic when I say things I know are in violation of the regressive teachings of various faiths.
- I'm a humanist when I say that I don't need a god in order to do good work.

There is one title, though, that I wish I could embrace. Sadly, I can't call myself an "apatheist." In theory, it shouldn't matter to me what someone else believes. It shouldn't make a difference that one person believes and another doesn't. But when that belief leads to real harm being done in the name of religion — as we've seen over and over again throughout history with the belittlement of women, the LGBTQ community, religious minorities (including Jews), and anyone else who happens to be a nonconformist — I can't do it.

There is value and comfort in some traditions. I happen to like the idea of naming your children after a deceased loved one. It's a way of keeping people's memory valid and it may even be a motivation to resume living your life after a devastating loss. It's why my younger son is named after Aunt Gertrude!

My son's name is actually Gregory, but that's close enough for government work. On the topic of names, my last name used to be Goldman, like my parents, but I changed it when I got married, and that's a different story!

Pictured right is **Jim Phynn**. He is a divorced, single father of two children living in a Philadelphia suburb. Phynn works in information technology for a major finance company.



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 publication 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 locations across the United States, with emphasis in the tristate area of Pennsylvania, Delaware, New Jersey as well as Southern California. FS activities and services depend on financial contributions from 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 would like to:

() become a supporter / renew support of FS (Please enclose checks payable to the Freethought Society):

\$30 Individual Supporter **\$40** 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** **\$50** **\$55** \$_____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 send a complimentary ezine (or hard copy upon request) to potential supporters. Please provide contact information for anyone who might be interested in receiving an FS publication.

Name: _____ Email: _____

Mail this form to: Freethought Society, P.O. Box 242, Pocopson, PA 19366

Scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society

Supporters of the Freethought Society (FS) often want to do more than just donating money. Listed below are various committees organized by FS. The committees are designed to fulfill the mission, goals and vision of FS. We assist 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 Secular Coalition for America 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)

Helping Hands

(provides helpers to seniors in emergency situations)

Jump into the Jean Pool

(collection of jeans for the homeless)

Meetup Committee

(social events and improving online communications)

Monthly Meeting Coordinators

(schedule and manage speakers and venues)

Secular Celebrations

(develop, organize, and implement new nontheist celebrations)

Speakers Bureau

(provide FS a resume, photo and speech subjects/titles)

Special Events

(coordinate unique events of interest to nontheists)

Sole Searching

(collection of athletic shoes for donation to the homeless)

Thomas Paine Memorial Committee

(assist with assemblies, city proclamations, and work on themed events)

Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee

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