



The Freethought Society News

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The Freethought Society News
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The 2019 Secular Leadership Summit

by Margaret Downey

“We all bring different things to the table,” I said as I chatted with the first few leaders who arrived in Alexandria, Virginia for the 14th Secular Leadership Summit. The Summit began on Friday, February 8, 2019 when those of us who could arrive by 6:00 PM enjoyed a buffet dinner at the Embassy Suites’ restaurant, Caprese. Judging from the genuinely warm greetings, laughter, and group photos being taken, the Summit was off to a terrific start.

The Secular Coalition for America (SCA) was the acting host of the 2019 Summit. SCA meticulously planned the two-day educational and team-building programs. **Rob Boston**, Senior Adviser for Americans United for Separation of Church and State and Editor of Church & State magazine, was one of several Saturday speakers. He provided a brief history of the United States’ religious freedom and separation of church and state, then told us how the religious right is trying to rewrite that history. Their revisions are born from their fear of losing control of the country. I was saddened by Boston’s description of how some Founding Fathers were condemned for not mentioning God in the Constitution.

After the Civil War, overt Christian religiosity prevailed in society and religious activists formed the National Reform Association. These are the folks who push for bills and amendments that would officially declare the United States of America, is a “Christian Nation.” They would also force prayer into public school curricula, and basically promote anything religious that the Founders had purposely left out of the Constitution!

Jerry Falwell, the religious right, literalists, conservatives, right-wing public policy groups, religious “liberty” legal groups, and fear mongering propaganda have done major damage to Jefferson’s Wall of Separation. “We must be on guard in particular for any actions taken by the group ‘Council for National Policy,’” Boston warned.

After giving us his view of what we must combat, Boston offered us some advice. Always tell the truth with great conviction. Strive to bring great passion to what we do. The nontheist community should also use technology equal to or even better than our religious counterparts. Regarding politics, Boston said that we must be more pragmatic with our approach to politics. If we disagree with a small portion of a politician’s platform it still might be wise to work with that person. Eighty-five percent in agreement is better than none! Boston also encouraged us to understand the value of compromise. We might not get 100% of what we seek legislatively, but making any kind of headway is better than none at all.

Boston’s next bit of advice was for all of us to do what we can to get people registered to vote and to help in any way to get voters to the polls. This piece of advice resonated with me. In 2018, the Freethought Society (FS) launched a “Voter Registration/Information” table project. The first such table was at Cheyney University during Black History Month and featured **Steve Hill**, who portrayed **Frederick Douglass** (see: “Celebrating Black History Month at Cheyney University,” [March/April 2018](#) issue of *The Freethought Society News*). FS hosted, for a second year in a row, a voter registration/information table at West Chester University on March 21, 2019. On March 27, 2019, tabling took place at Haverford College. See the articles about those efforts elsewhere in this issue of *The Freethought Society News*.

Boston said that we must be prepared to present evidence-based arguments when we advocate for separation of religion and government. Facts, however, will only take us so far. Being prepared to tell our own journey stories and anecdotes will help us connect on an emotional level — perhaps even more effectively than statistics, numbers and hard data.

Even with their recent successes, it is helpful to keep in mind all the religious right has lost. They used to have the power to ban birth control, force children to pray in schools, censor books and films, ban the teaching of evolution, punish people for blasphemy and

intimidate non-theists into silence. They lost all of that. We beat them before and can do it again.

As nontheists, we believe there is no afterlife. You get one shot at this life, so make it matter by standing for something of importance. You may not win every battle, but even in defeat, you lay the groundwork for future victories.

When we encounter people who don't want separation of religion and government we can then ask, "What do you want instead?" The next question could be, "If you don't want separation of religion and government, what designated religion do you want and why?"

Boston's speech provided the leaders in the audience with terrific ideas and kicked off the Summit with inspiration for our roles in the secular community.

Dr. Anjan Chakravartty from the University of Miami spoke about his role as The Appignani Foundation Chair for the Study of Atheism, Humanism, and Secular Ethics. This chair is the first of its kind in the United States and Chakravartty is the first to occupy it. The Chair was made possible through a gift by **Louis J. Appignani**. I've known Appignani for 20 years and I've always been impressed with his generosity as well as his commitment to funding projects that emphasize science, logic, and reason. His role in Humanism has moved the needle toward a more secular society.

While Chakravartty described the difficulties of getting the University of Miami to agree to the establishment of the Chair for the Study of Atheism, Humanism, and Secular Ethics, his presentation made us all hopeful that we too can succeed when applying the same dedication and stalwart perseverance as Appignani and Charkravartty.

Kamer Davis led the discussion session about the 2020 election. We covered communication strategies and various ways in which to convey secularism and the importance of maintaining separation of religion and government. Many ideas were discussed, but conversations highlighted the importance of voter registration, lobbying and conducting as many public events as possible. I'm proud to say that FS has promoted and continues to promote secularism in all these ways.

The Sunday morning program included panelists who provided legislative updates. Included on the panel were **Mark Dann** (Secular Coalition for America), **Allison Gill** (American Atheists), **Matthew Bulger** (American Humanist Association), **Nicholas Little** (Center of Inquiry), and **Andrew Seidel** (Freedom From Religion Foundation). Each attorney/organization representative talked about various legal actions underway. There are too many lawsuits to list in this article. To learn more about current legal actions, please visit the website of each of the above listed organizations.

In the afternoon, secular leaders chose to participate in two of four breakout sessions. Titles and presenters were; Diversity of Memberships by **Brandi Alexander** and **Mandisa Thomas**; Fundraising Techniques by **Maggie Ardiente**; Board Governance by **Doug White**; and Youth Participation by **Kim Newton**, **Kevin Bolling** and **Evan Clark**

Usually, either the FS Vice-President **Glen Loev** or Board Member **Patti Butcheck** attends the Secular Leadership Summit. This year, unfortunately neither Loev nor Butcheck were able to attend. Attending Secular Leadership Summits requires significant commitments of participants' time and

money. Earmarked supporter donations would be appreciated to help offset attendance costs for Board Members. Please see the FS website to donate:

<https://www.FtSociety.org>

I attended the "Diversity" and the "Youth" workshops. I appreciated the advice and suggestions offered in both sessions and will put what I learned into action this year. FS will be offering a wider variety of activities and will conduct more outreach efforts to attract a younger and more diverse level of participation. FS will be offering an expanded number of events on the West Coast with concentration in the Southern California area. Please watch for more information and announcements in future Ezines/newsletters, [Meetup](#), [Facebook](#), the FS [website](#) and [Twitter](#).

The work continued on Monday when those who could stay in town visited the offices of three founders of the Congressional Freethought Caucus. The Caucus was established in April 2018 to foster science- and reason-based solutions to national challenges. Their goal is to defend the secular character of government. The caucus was established in reaction to the ever-encroaching influence of religion in public policy. Caucus members oppose the inappropriate intrusion of religion into government. The Founders of the United States envisioned a secular government and incorporated that view into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights.

Representative **Brenda Lulenar Lawrence** (Democrat-Michigan) was not in her office to greet us personally, but her Executive Assistant took notes as each secular leader introduced themselves. Representative Lawrence previously served as the Mayor of Southfield, Michigan from 2001 to 2015. She has been a member of the Freethought Caucus since its founding.

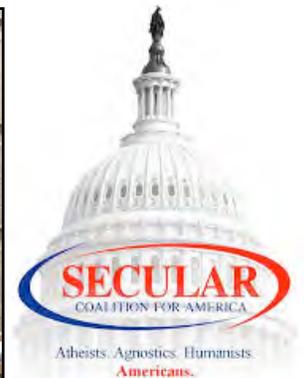
When secular leaders visited the office of Representative **Jamie Raskin** (Democrat-Maryland), we were greeted by his Executive Assistant who immediately apologized for Raskin having been called away for an important vote. I was just starting to introduce myself when Raskin opened his office door. We all broke out in applause to see him. I was allowed to finish my self-introduction and made sure to mention that Raskin and I share a love for the work of **Thomas Paine**. Raskin then delivered an impromptu speech about the important work all of us are doing to maintain separation of religion and government. His words could not have been more inspirational and encouraging. Raskin then posed for a group photo with us and cheerily shook each and everyone's hand as we left. We all departed joyful and proud.

We were also fortunate to have a personal in-office meeting with Representative **Jared William Huffman** (Democrat-California). Huffman greeted us warmly and as we each introduced ourselves, he listened intently. Huffman took the time to ask most of us a question or two. It was an impressive meeting and Huffman seemed sincerely appreciative of our visit. He told us to continue our important work and said that our input would be welcomed as the Freethought Caucus continues to address issues of discrimination and separation of religion and government. Huffman joined us in a group photo and we left his office eager, empowered, and ready to take on all the challenges that face us. My job as a leader of a volunteer nonprofit organization is to convey what I learned to inspire others. □

2019 Secular Leadership Summit Photos



Pictured above are Secular Coalition for America leaders of member organizations with the new Executive Director, **Debbie Allen** (left side standing). In the top row (left to right), beginning with Allen are **CW Brown, Margaret Downey, Bart Worden, Noelle George, Kevin Bolling, Sarah Haider, Kim Newton, Roy Speckhardt, Nick Fish, and Hypatia Alexander**. Seated in the front row (left to right) are **Jason Torpy, Robyn Blunner, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Mandisa Thomas, Terry Waslow, and Gayle Jordon**.



For more information about the Secular Coalition for America, visit their website at: <https://secular.org>

Pictured before visiting Freethought Caucus members on Capitol Hill (left to right in the top row) are **Kevin Bolling, Annie Laurie Gaylor, Rachel Deitch, Mandisa Thomas, Evan Clark, Paul Colin, and CW Brown**. In the bottom row (left to right) are **Mark Dan, Karylena Cruz, Andrew Seidel, Rebecca Markert, Robyn Blunner, Mark Gura, Neil Polzin and Margaret Downey**.

The Southern California Secular Leadership Summit

by Margaret Downey

Just two weeks after attending the national Secular Leadership Summit sponsored by the Secular Coalition for America, held in Alexandria, Virginia, I attended the Southern California Secular Summit sponsored by the Coalition of Reason (COR). The Freethought Society (FS) is involved with and cosponsors many secular nontheist Southern California events, meetings and conferences. FS representation was important in order to meet and establish relationships with other secular leaders. The opportunity provided a venue to brainstorm, socialize and exchange ideas.

Tucked away in the foothills of Temecula, California, a group of 30 secularists met at a beautiful Airbnb home. Each participant contributed to rental cost, but the entire conference was underwritten by several anonymous and generous supporters of COR. **Evan Clark, David Rice, Rebecca Kitchings** and **Sarah Levin** were the official organizers of the Summit.

Everyone was excited to learn that journalist Heather Adams would be spending the first day of the Summit with us. She writes for the Religion News Service and is familiar with the nontheist community. We were barely aware that Adams was observing, taking notes, and quietly interviewing people throughout the day. She was attentive, and we were glad to host her. The very positive article appeared online on March 8, 2019. Below is the link:

<https://religionnews.com/2019/03/08/atheist-summits-aim-to-find-community-and-power-in-networking-nonbelievers/>

I was impressed with **Eric Ozols'** presentation "Ask an Atheist." Ozols sets up an Ask an Atheist table in various locations throughout Southern California. He has been seen in city parks, beach fronts, and farmers markets. The table draws a lot of attention and many people stop by to chat, sometimes argue, but most of the time to just exchange a few questions and answers.

Ozols said that atheists must be more visible in public settings, work to build a larger and more diverse community, encourage conversations, and spark curiosity. Ozols is a pilot and has agreed to present this speech to Freethought Society supporters on the East Coast. Please watch for meeting details in a future ezine/newsletter.

Phil Calderone told us about his experiences being involved in the Riverside Interfaith Council. He encouraged leaders to find a way to get involved with Interfaith Councils. Some are more open-minded than others, but just asking for inclusion is an exercise in normalizing nontheism.

Once a nontheist representative becomes a part of an Interfaith Council, shared experiences will help reinforce that religion does not "own" charity, good works or morality. Calderone's voice always speaks of "action" not just "prayer" to solve social problems.

Summit organizer Kitchings was also a speaker. She talked about the importance of having someone in the group trained and ready to perform secular weddings and funerals. Kitchings is a certified Humanist Celebrant. She is certified through the American Humanist Association (AHA).

Kitchings' interesting presentation emphasized the importance of providing nontheist families and individuals

with a secular way of celebrating and honoring sentimental life events. She generously offered to train interested people and recommended AHA as the certifying organization.

I agree with everything Kitchings said and promoted. I enjoyed hearing her speak about the importance of offering ceremonies without religion. I've been a Secular Officiant since 2002, certified by the Center for Inquiry (CFI). I chose to get certified by CFI rather than AHA because CFI's certification program does not include an affiliation with any religious connections. AHA's program is affiliated with the Humanist Society which claims Humanism is a religion. Personally, I do not consider my nontheist philosophical life stance a religion.

CFI's Secular Officiant certification simply states that the nontheist community should be given equality under the law and that nontheists have every right to legal weddings officiated by trained and vetted persons who represent and understand their particular religion-free needs. I want to help CFI to bring legal challenges to laws that only allow religious officials to solemnize marriages. Banning secular officiants from authorization to perform the same civil ceremonies as religious officiants should be ruled unconstitutional.

Due to being listed as a "religious Humanist Society," AHA Humanist Celebrants are recognized as clergy in all states and many countries and therefore are accorded the same rights and privileges granted by law to priests, ministers, and rabbis of traditional theistic religions.

The CFI legal team is willing and able to assist couples and officiants who have the time and courage to challenge state marriage laws. Some progress has already been made; CFI certified Secular Celebrants may now solemnize marriages in Washington, DC and Indiana. On July 14, 2014, the 7th Circuit ruled that Secular Celebrants are legally able to solemnize marriages in Indiana. Here is the link to the ruling:

<https://www.theindianalawyer.com/articles/34600-th-circuit-indianas-marriage-solemnization-statute-violates-constitution>

Kitchings and I are both eager to deliver local and state government meeting invocations in roles as Secular Officiant/Humanist Celebrants. We seek equal representation in our communities and strive to provide diversified ceremonial openings for public gatherings and city and state government meetings. On March 25, 2019, I officially applied to deliver a secular invocation at the Philadelphia State House.

Joey Krieger, representing the Secular Student Alliance (SSA), addressed the group about how to attract younger people to nontheist/humanist organizations. He recommended an effort be made to identify the issues that "formerly religious" youth care about. This task might seem daunting, but we can ask questions of younger visitors and we can watch media trends to determine the answers.

Krieger also suggested that groups develop secular music events and he said that the secular community can learn much from looking at religious rituals. I agree. This is why FS has been working on hosting the Secular Day of the Dead and a *Tree of Knowledge*-themed winter holiday.

Krieger confirmed that FS is on the right track when he said that "young people need and want something to identify

with.” He went on to say that “young people want to know what we stand for and who we are before they actually join.”

“Young people appreciate diverse events,” Krieger said. I agree and FS supporters can take pride knowing that unique youth and family social events, lectures, and outreach efforts have crossed many cultural lines.

Krieger urged us to not only engage younger people who attend events but find a place in the organization for them. Perhaps asking them to be more involved or simply staying in touch would be enough. However, Krieger said to not bombard them when they attend an event. Some older members of groups actually turn off new and younger supporters by being too eager. “Be careful not to be too aggressive,” Krieger cautioned.

“Hosting regular and free events are a draw for youth,” Krieger said. He suggested weekly meetings located in close proximity to universities and he said that youth will be attracted to podcasts that are interactive. While these are terrific goals, FS would need many more volunteers to make weekly meetings and podcasts happen. This is a call for such a volunteer. Contact FS if you are interested. Send an email to: Volunteers@FtSociety.org

Sarah Levin from SCA was the next presenter. She added to Krieger’s suggestions, saying “Young people don’t want to go to lectures. They want experiences, they have hobbies, and they are looking to find like-minded people to share their passions.” She also said that people organize around causes so groups need to be proactive, up-to-date, and involved with politics and social issues, such as global warming, science education, civil rights and freedom of choice.

Levin’s presentation was about the importance of political lobbying. She highlighted many reasons why leaders should promote SCA’s Lobby Days, host local lobby days, and get involved with registering voters.

FS is an affiliate member of SCA and in that capacity keeps informed about issues of concern to the secular community. To get individual updates from SCA, subscribe at: <https://secular.org>

Next, Executive Director of Atheists United **Evan Clark** addressed the subject of regional collaboration. The goals he promoted were for leaders to strive to become a more powerful voting block in Southern California. Getting people to lobby locally would make a huge difference with secular opinions being conveyed to legislators.

Clark hopes to see groups share speakers and programing ideas. We all agreed that a Facebook page for the leadership group would help us share information.

We all also agreed that the secular/nontheist community needs more help with marketing and advertising. Billboards are expensive but a unity type of conference may be beneficial.

Clark recommended that we must make an effort to identify new potential leaders and see that they are trained well as assistants or interns.

Ryan Bell provided more information about how fast SSA is growing. We were happy to hear that SSA has 200 chapters around the United States, with groups mostly on college campuses. Bell reminded us that most students are campus-bound and fairly insular, which makes volunteering and participation difficult. He suggested groups offer car pooling, student discounts to events, and coordinating with

SSA groups to host events on campus rather than external venues.

FS maintains a list of students who, at a spur of the moment’s notice, will be able to attend an event that might otherwise be too costly. When a ticket holder cancels, FS will ask students on the list who would like to attend in substitution. This method has worked well over the years and many FS supporters generously donate their unused tickets to students.

The day ended with discussions about why people seek out nontheist groups to affiliate with. Some are looking for a like-minded community. Some are interested in getting better information to learn more about science, nature and philosophy. Their involvement is to become better educated. There are also those who want to become more involved in causes and advocacy. It’s up to secular/nontheist leaders to design meetings, events and services that will appeal to all these interests. This is why FS offers a wide variety of volunteer opportunities, unusual social events, location diversity, and interesting speakers, as frequently as possible. We will continue to do this and seek to offer even more variety. It takes money and volunteers, however, to keep a nonprofit organization alive and well. All FS supporters are potential leaders and we seek more participation from everyone. Your participation, small or large, is needed and would be very much appreciated. If you cannot donate, please sign up to volunteer. A list of committees can be found on the FS website at this link:

<https://www.ftsociety.org/volunteers/>



Pictured above are some of the participants of the Southern California Leadership Summit. The photo was taken on the last day of the Summit at a luncheon held in the city of Temecula. Many participants had already started their journeys home.

Pictured left to right in the front row are **Margaret Downey, Sarah Levin, Kate O’Malley, Yara Cuetara, Christine Jones, Rebecca Kitchings, and David Rice.**

In the back row (left to right) are **Eric Ozols, Evan Clark, and Phil Calderone.**

The 2019 West Chester University Voter Registration

For the second year in a row, the Freethought Society (FS) set up a voter registration/information table at West Chester University, located at 700 S High St, West Chester, Pennsylvania. The table was open Thursday, March 21, 2019, from 10:00 AM to 4:00 PM in the Sykes Student Union Building. Adding a historical touch to the presentation, **Margaret Downey** portrayed suffrage activist **Alice Paul** and **Marjorie Goldman** portrayed the early suffragist **Susan B. Anthony**.

The 19th Century Women's Suffrage theme was designed to educate students about the difficulties endured by women as they struggled towards obtaining the right to vote. To honor the legacy of these early feminists and voting rights heroes, free literature and one-on-one conversations stressed the importance of registering to vote. The Women's Suffrage theme voter registration and information tabling project is scheduled to coincide with Women's History Month, celebrated nationwide every March.

"I was pleased to talk to students in the character of Susan B. Anthony to dramatically emphasize how important it is to remember and honor the difficulties related to the 72-year struggle women endured to get the right to vote," Goldman said.

Goldman has been a longtime advocate of history education. Since 1993, Goldman has appeared as Susan B. Anthony in numerous venues, including the National Archives, U.S. Mint, Library of Congress, Freedoms Foundation of Valley Forge, League of Women Voters, Peddler's Village (Cock & Bull Restaurant), and the Rocky Mountain Museum of Tennessee.

Downey explained, "While Susan B. Anthony helped to begin the Women's Suffrage Movement in 1848, the right to vote was not granted until 1920. Suffragist Alice Paul used dramatic tactics that finally ushered in legislation giving women their rights. She is my hero and I'm happy to have had an opportunity to portray her as I speak to interested students."

Downey has portrayed various Suffragist heroes since 1993. Her efforts include participating in theater productions, special events, parades, walking tours, and class instruction.

Students were offered voter registration information, photo opportunities, free literature, and complimentary snacks.

Longtime FS supporter **Al Palmer** stopped by the table to offer his assistance in cleaning up at the end of the day. He is pictured below flanked by Downey (left) and Goldman (right). He resides within three blocks of the West Chester University campus.



The West Chester University all-female treble voice a cappella group *Gracenotes* visited the Freethought Society voter registration table and sang a few songs to **Marjorie Goldman** (pictured in the center) and **Margaret Downey** (right end).

Everyone in the group was registered to vote, but they enjoyed hearing about the lives of the suffragists Goldman and Downey were portraying.

The women were curious why pansies were display on the table. They learned that when **William Shakespeare** wrote *Hamlet* he said, "...there is pansies, that's for thoughts." Many Suffragists would distribute pansies during rallies and parades saying that their "thoughts are free."



The 2019 Haverford College Voter Registration

Haverford College Freethinkers is a student group formed in April 2018. The founders of the club are **Matthew Reichwein**, **Alexander Guterrez** and **Joseph Staruski**.

The Haverford Freethinkers group was created following a Special Plenary that took place at the college. Plenary is the bi-annual forum where students propose amendments to the Honor Code, which is the student-created ethical code of conduct to which they are sworn. If the Honor Code fails to ratify at a regular Plenary, a Special Plenary is called, in which the Code is redrafted.

One proposed amendment greatly alarmed Reichwein, Guterrez, and Stauski. In the Honor Code, there appears a list of identities that the Code protects, such as racial, religious, sexual, and gender identity. Political ideology used to be among this list of protected identities, but an amendment was proposed to remove it from the list. The rationale was that “a Republican discriminating against a trans person is different than a Republican being discriminated against for his or her views.” This wording, the young men thought, demonstrates an alarming ignorance of history. One only has to look to the 1950s McCarthy Era to see the danger of removing protections of political ideology.

Haverford College is, unfortunately, a very politically homogeneous place. People who do not agree with the current brand of social justice and identity politics are often viewed as racists, sexists, homophobes, etc. The Haverford Freethinkers viewed the amendment as an attempt to legitimize McCarthy-type behavior. The newly-worded Honor Code prompted Reichwein, Guterrez, and Staruski to start Haverford Freethinkers as an organization that would foster and promote diversity of opinion and political heterodoxy.

The Freethought Society (FS) connected with the Haverford Freethinkers when several of its members attended the December 2, 2018 Philadelphia *Tree of Knowledge*



Pictured above are **Margaret Downey** and **Joseph Staruski**. Staruski was helpful with the set up and take down of the Freethought Society display table.

installation ceremony at the Philadelphia Ethical Society. Fast friends were made and the connection had immediate benefits.

FS president **Margaret Downey** arranged for the Haverford Freethinkers to secure a campus location for FS to set up a voter registration and information table. The table opened on Thursday, March 27, 2019 in the campus dining center foyer in celebration of Women’s History Month. Downey portrayed suffrage activist **Alice Paul** and **Marjorie Goldman** portrayed the early suffragist **Susan B. Anthony** that day.

The 19th Century Women’s Suffrage theme attracted many students and provided Downey and Goldman an opportunity to educate students about the difficulties endured by Suffragists who were attempting to obtain the right to vote. To honor the legacy of these early feminists and voting rights heroines, free literature and conversations stressed the importance of registering to vote. Students were offered voter registration forms, information, complimentary snacks, free literature and photo opportunities. Goldman and Downey were pleased to discover that a high percentage of students at Haverford were already registered voters.

Many students stopped by the table throughout the day, and the event also received attention from the media. Journalist **Stephanie Farr** and photographer **Jessica Griffin** from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Daily News* and Philly.com arrived to capture the activities. Farr had been interested in doing an article about Downey for some time after her name was submitted to her column “We the People,” which accepts nominations for coverage consideration. The resulting article was published in the three publications that Farr represents. The article can be seen at the following link:

<https://www.philly.com/news/atheism-freethought-society-friggatriskaidekaphobia-superstitions-20190410.html>



Pictured left are Margaret Downey and a young man named, **Elian**. He stopped at the Freethought Society (FS) voter registration and information table when he saw the headlines of a displayed FS newsletter. “Scouts for Equality’s Outreach to The Freethought Society” stopped him in his tracks. He is friends with the author of the article, **Justin Wilson**. Elian was thrilled to know about the efforts to change the Boy Scouts of America’s bigoted membership rules, which specifically prohibit nontheists from participating. Elian is a proud Eagle Scout who supports the efforts of Scouts for Equality.

Pictured right is **Marjorie Goldman** dressed in her **Susan B. Anthony** costume.



United Nations Committee for Freedom of Religion or Belief Report

by Alan Gold

The Freethought Society (FS) became involved with the United Nations Freedom of Religion or Belief Committee in 1995 when **Margaret Downey** attended their “Year of Tolerance” conference. She was asked to represent nontheists in the United States after she sent her first report about intolerance and discrimination to the United Nations Special Rapporteur.

The purpose of the Committee then and now is to convince countries to be more accepting of the wide variety of religious belief and/or those with no belief in a god. The Committee seeks better and more tolerant societies worldwide, reflecting the goals of the United Nations.

Unfortunately, many countries throughout Asia and Africa have become more hostile to minority religions, atheists, and LGBTQ individuals. In some countries it is a felony to practice a minority religion, have no religion, or live openly as a homosexual.

Six years ago, I volunteered to attend Committee meetings in New York City, allowing Downey to continue her work on other projects. I have met representatives of many oppressed religions, such as Voodoo, Mormons, Baha’i, Christian sub-cults and other mainstream religions in the West that are minorities in other parts of the world. I am connected to many of them through social media. The interactions are beneficial in them getting to know me, an atheist, and for me to get to know them.

Ethical Humanist **Dan Hoffman** also attends the New York City meetings. He was once an FS board member and represented the interests of FS when he was a board member of the organization. I basically stepped into his role at the invitation of Downey.

I am proud to say that I now occupy a position on the board of the Freedom of Religion or Belief Committee. I

attend regular board meetings, quarterly gatherings, and a general annual meeting. I often strive for more activism. My ideas have been met with red tape and obfuscation. For instance, I have constantly asked the Committee to make a public statement about our cause. I would also like for there to be a celebrity spokesperson who might attract the media so that more people will become aware of the work we do. Committee members must fully agree on any new approaches and suggestions that are sent to the Committee’s Special Rapporteur in Geneva. While the directors in Geneva are working hard on our goals, there is not much movement or interest toward activism and/or publicity.

There were several hundred attendees from around the world at the meeting I attended on May 1, 2019. Many speakers emphatically expressed that discrimination and intolerance problems have been getting worse over the last few years — especially in many Muslim countries. We also learned that Muslims in Burma and China are ruthlessly persecuted. A member of the Chinese delegation said that his country was merely defending itself against daily violent protests and terrorist bombings by Muslims. He said that the Chinese were justified in placing their western “problem” Muslims in re-education or “trade” camps. In my opinion, this is a shocking way to try to resolve the problems and I was happy that two Christian fundamentalists on the same panel, with well-reasoned objections, vigorously countered the disclosure.

When speaking of America’s annual reports and lists of the worst violators of religious freedom rights, panelist **Tom Farr** said the reports are “vitaly important...but they are entirely dynastic in nature. They shine a light on the problem but do little to solve it.”

Farr also noted that the economic sanctions put into place in countries that have violated civil and human rights have not yielded significant or successful results either. He advised members of the Committee to implement strategic incentives for promoting religious freedom in places of crisis. “Success in such efforts will not come easy,” he cautioned.

At the end of the session I found myself upset by the lack of progress being made. I suppose just talking about these difficulties is a step forward. As with all difficult social issues, nothing is resolved by prayers.

My friend and fellow nontheist representative, Hoffman (right) is pictured with me at the May 1st Freedom of Religion or Belief annual general meeting.



Pictured above from left to right are **Kelsi Zorsi**, president of the the Freedom of Religion or Belief Committee; Archbishop **Bernardito C. AUSA**, permanent Observer of the Holy See to the United Nations; Archbishop **Ignatius Kaigama**, former President of the Nigerian Bishops Conference; Dr. **Hajnalka Juhasz**, a diplomat and international lawyer from Hungary; **Sam Brownback** “His Excellency” (a diplomatic title), who is Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom; and Dr. **Tom Farr**, President of Religious Freedom Institute.

Book Review: *The Church of Exemptions* A Farce with Footnotes*

by Tom Melchiorre

How many of us have thought and talked about starting our own religion, then sitting back and watching the money pour in from the lonely, the shut-ins, the elderly, the gullible? What prevents us from using, to our advantage, the many religious legal exemptions that bind all others? What prevents us from doing so?

I would say mostly our morals, and most would surely agree. But what if we actually used those religious legal exemptions to destroy those same religious legal exemptions, and quite possibly religions themselves as well as the very concept of religion in its entirety?

That is the premise of *The Church of Exemptions: A Farce with Footnotes*, a satirical novel by **Luis Granados**, atheist and lawyer (retired), who normally writes nonfiction but has now explored, via fiction, this seemingly contradictory, oxymoronic, Three Stooges-like idea to what could be the very logical conclusion stated above.

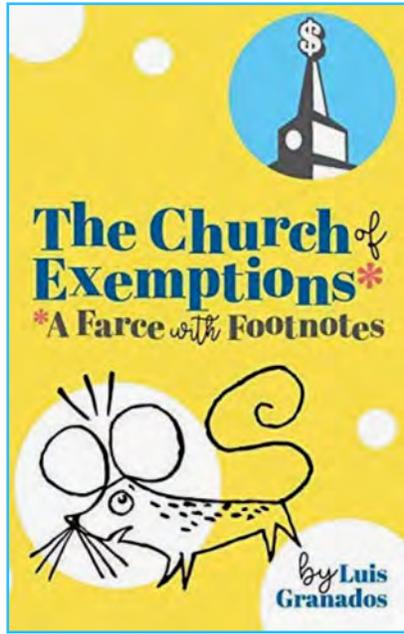
Full disclosure: I've known Luis for many years and have worked with him on many articles of historic nature as editor-in-chief of two atheist magazines.

This is Granados' first fictional foray. His nonfiction writing is precise, exact, well-written, interesting, and informative. Given his legal background, this book is very readable for the layperson. Granados carries these qualities over to the mostly-fictional world of *The Church of Exemptions* to a large degree.

The storyline revolves around Nick Fratelli, a low-level DC civil servant just getting by, and who drinks too much, and accidentally gets an invite to a gathering at a high-prestige legal firm. There he expounds on his idea of religious loopholes to an oil billionaire frustrated with EPA drilling restrictions costing him billions in lost revenue, and engineers religious loopholes for him to get around those restrictions.

This isn't, sadly, as absurd as it may sound. Granados quotes Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, in her *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* dissent, who warned that "[A]pproving some religious claims while deeming others unworthy of accommodation could be perceived as favoring one religion over another, the very risk the Establishment Clause was designed to preclude. The Court, I fear, has ventured into a minefield by its immoderate reading of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA)."

The novel's chapters are actually datelines, which is a nice touch to move the story along, keeping the reader as a fellow traveler on Nick's mission. What gets in the way of the story, however, is the second storyline, Nick's constant lust for Natalie, the one that got away, and the one he's determined to lay. I'm no prude, but with Granados' over-



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zealous descriptions of Nick's libido, it took some doing to get to dateline 4, where the story really starts to roll and Nick's ultimate plan starts to kick in and absurdity abounds. Even then, though, I couldn't really get behind the character.

Still, as the novel progresses, it gets more and more absurd, and therein lies the novelty of the novel's premise. With each religious loophole comes a real-life loophole, annotated at the bottom of the page, an actual religious legal accommodation so absurd you'd think reasonable people would say no — but no — they said yes. Hence the * in the novel's title.

It's moments like these in the novel that will aggravate the hell out of you (excuse the pun) yet propel you forward to see what happens next.

The ending is somewhat predictable, if not anticlimactic. I had hoped it wouldn't be so and was disappointed with the novel's abrupt wrap-up and obvious surrendering to the very religiosity Nick condemns throughout the novel. Others may see it as viable and rational (and more than possible).

As Granados' says in his accompanying letter to the review copy, "I don't expect that you will agree with the book's protagonist on every point, but I do hope you are willing to help advance the general idea that largely uniform rule of law has advantages over today's patchwork of religious privileges and exemptions. With any luck, the book

will break right about the time Congress is taking up the Democrats' pledge to do something about RFRA."

Overall, I enjoyed the novel more than not. Perhaps, as an editor and writer, I have a forewarning of how things will go. It's an occupational hazard.

All this being said, when it comes to the religiously absurd, Granados delivers full force, and that, by itself, makes *The Church of Exemptions: A Farce with Footnotes* worth reading. Preferably on a Sunday. On Saturday if you're Jewish. Friday if you're Muslim. And with a glass of wine — or beer in honor of redeemed Nick — to wash down the absurdity, the unbelievable that is believable, that makes this novel succeed.

About the author of *The Church of Exemptions: A Farce with Footnotes*:

Granados is a retired attorney living in Washington, DC. He is the author of *Damned Good Company* and the co-editor of *A Jefferson Bible for the Twenty-first Century*. His biweekly "Rules Are for Schmucks" column appears online at TheHumanist.com. All proceeds from book sales will remain with the American Humanist Association, the publisher, in its efforts to fight the good fight for separation of church and state. □

Vive le Thomas Paine!

by Buck Bowen

In March 2019, I was fortunate to be able to take a two-week vacation with my wonderful girlfriend, **Sophia Giang**. When we decided to include Paris, France in our travel plans, I remembered that the city has a Thomas Paine connection. Through my friendship with **Margaret Downey**, I've come to know a lot about Paine's life, his work, and his importance in the founding of the United States. I contacted Downey to get recommendations about where we should go during our time in Paris in order to see related sites to the great Patriot.

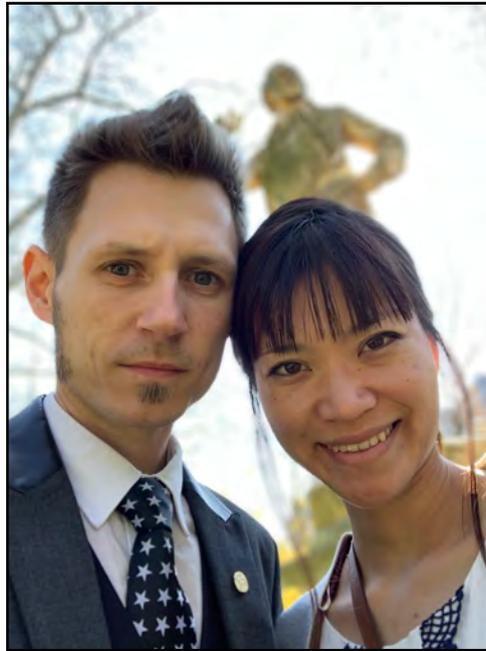
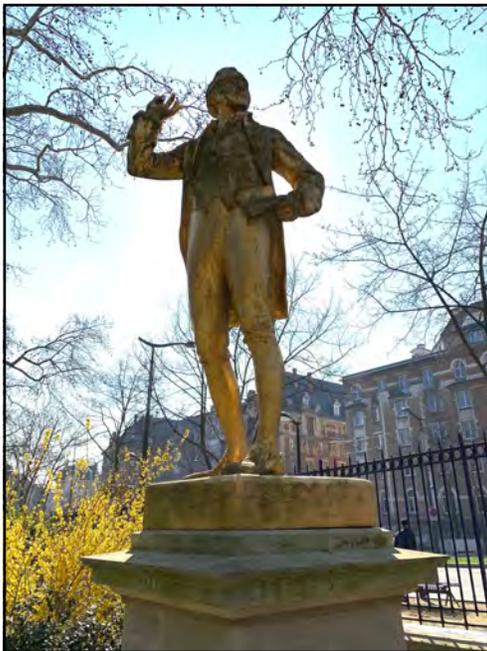
Downey recommended that we visit the golden statue of Paine located at 2 rue Gazan, Parc Montsouris. The statue, created by **Gutzon Borglum**, was placed there by **Joseph L. Lewis**, president of Freethinkers of America. Borglum is best known as the sculptor of Mount Rushmore.

Lewis commissioned the statue after raising funds, mostly from freethinkers in the United States. It was a remarkable accomplishment to have persuaded the government

of France to allow a sculpture of Paine in Paris. Lewis most likely used the fact that during a meeting with Paine, **Napoléon Bonaparte** said, "a statue of gold should be erected to you in every city in the universe."

The Paine statue was located in the complete opposite direction from all of our original plans, but given Paine's literary contributions to the world I felt it was worth the effort. When we got to Parc Montsouris, our GPS directions showed that the statue was located way on the other side. The path we were supposed to take, however, was blocked by two tree trimming trucks.

We saw some local Parisians rush past the vehicles, so Sophia and I started running as well. Just as we were about to sneak by the trucks, one of the workers stopped us. Deflated and upset, we slowly retreated in defeat. As we turned around and started walking the "long route," Sophia noticed a shining statue. There was Thomas Paine in all his glory! The statue was very close to the way we entered the area. So, had we not been turned away by the tree trimmers, we would have been walking around for who knows how long trying to find the statue! It was a nice turn of events.



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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.

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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)