The Freethought Society News
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# *Freethought Society President Speaks at Freedom of Religion or Belief Committee Conference*

On March 16, 2021, Freethought Society (FS) president **Margaret Downey** participated in the 65th Session of the United Nation's Commission on the Status of Women. Downey was invited to be a panelist in the session entitled "The Power of Freedom of Religion or Belief to Elevate Women and Girls," convened by the NGO (Non-Governmental Organization) Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief.

The Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief was formed in 1991 to promote and defend international agreements protecting freedom of religion or belief. The Committee comprises of civic leaders, advances freedom of religion or belief by coordinating NGO activities in New York City that reinforce the United Nations' efficacy in protecting the rights of freedom of thought, conscience, religion or belief. Members of the Committee communicate with the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, other relevant United Nation Offices, and United Nations member states. Freethought Society board member **Alan Gold** is also a board member of the Committee.

Other panelists on March 16th were **Bani Dugal** (Bahá'í representative), **Blu Greenberg** (representing the Jewish Orthodox community), and **Carole McConkie** (Latter-day-Saints representative). The moderator was **Kelsey Zorzi,** who is the president of the Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief. The event was advertised as a "panel of prominent female leaders to discuss how their diverse religious and belief backgrounds have shaped their views and prepared them for leadership positions around the world as well as how the freedom of religion or belief is critical to empowering women and girls." After the panelists presented their 10-minute presentations, there was a question-and-answer session. Downey's speech is reprinted below:

*Thank you for including the voice of an atheist freethinker in this discussion about empowering and elevating the position of women in societies around the world. "Freethought" is an umbrella term that covers people who have concluded that there is no God. We reject religious dogma from ancient times to the current day.*

*We know that this is our one and only life, that all choices we make during our lifetime have consequences, and that our futures are not pre-ordained. We, not any deities, are responsible for our lives. My talk this afternoon will convey how women, and all societies can benefit from the lifestance and worldview of the nontheist community.*

*We are born atheists and remain so until we are taught the religion of the family structure in which we are raised. Imagine how much better the world would be if every child were taught that every day provides us with opportunities to do good works, fulfill the highest potential of our intelligence, and make the world a better place. This is what we should all seek to exemplify and teach our children.*

*I'm sure all the speakers on today's panel can agree that doing good works empowers women and can unite us all — religious and non-religious alike. Nontheists — just like those in the religious communities — give generously, donating our time and money to help others.*

*But what about fulfilling the highest potential of intelligence? There are many religions that deny women equality in the home, community, and educational institutions. Many religious dogmas place blame on women for supposed and imagined sins. This type of rhetoric does not empower women. It damages them — sometimes beyond repair.*

*We also see women living in subjugation as they are forced to follow punitive religious rules such as not being able to leave the house unescorted by a man, being blamed for being the victims of rape, accused of witchcraft, and on and on. In too many religious countries,*

*women must cover their bodies and even their faces simply because a religious belief has established a fear of the power of a woman's beauty.*

*If we strive to empower and elevate women and girls, religious beliefs must be evaluated on their real-wold consequences and not taken as the absolute dictates of a supernatural deity. The adoption of equal educational opportunities must take its place if we want to reach a time when women will have, and believe that they are deserving of full equality, respect and power based on their integrity, worth, and abilities — no different than men in those regards. Nontheists contend that the rejection of a belief in the existence of a supernatural god or gods can enable women to elevate and empower themselves! So, how do we actually help women and girls?*

*Providing opportunities for education is a major component of the answer. We must make available to women and girls the strength to reject that which does not seem credible to them, the power to question authority, and the freedom to live life free of gods as well as harmful dogma.*

*At an early age, I questioned the authority of the church. I asked many questions. I demanded evidence and facts that would substantiate what I was being told. I rejected my family's superstitions as I observed that they did not solve problems. They only provided wishful thinking. I read as much as I could about philosophy, science, critical thinking and skepticism and never held back my opinions about religion and freedom of thought — as you are witnessing today. The power and freedom to question and speak out is how I became a leader in the nontheist community. It is critically important that all women and girls, actually that everyone regardless of their gender, have this same freedom.*

*It was only at age 25 that I found others who thought like me. That is when I realized that I am not alone. To help connect non-religious people to each other and to provide a philosophical home for those who have reached the conclusion that there are no gods, members of the nontheist community have established many large nonprofit organizations.*

*These organizations include the Freethought Society, The Freedom From Religion Foundation, Ex-Muslims of North America, The Center For Inquiry, the Secular Student Alliance, Hispanic American Freethinkers, Recovering from Religion, Congress of Secular Jewish Organizations, American Atheists, Black Nonbelievers, and the American Humanist Association, among many others. We have also established smaller groups to serve local needs.*

*I trust that we all agree that with knowledge comes power. Community and freethought literature is readily available if one knows where to look, and for example the Freethought Society maintains a list of recommended reading. An important overall goal for us today is to address how educational materials can be distributed to women and girls who seek to be empowered and elevated. One must want to be educated and one must know that information awaits them, easily and without prohibitive costs.*

*I implore the Freedom of Religion or Belief Committee to examine ways in which freethought, humanist, and atheist materials can be made available equally with religious materials when sought after by curious women and girls.*

*Another goal of critical importance is to obtain educational opportunities for women and girls that are unhindered by male dominance such as has happened recently in Nigeria. Kidnappings, threats, and the burning down of schools are completely unacceptable under any conditions and all possible actions must be taken to prevent such atrocities from happening. We cannot expect that a girl will be able to reach her fullest potential when religious fanaticism is dictating educational opportunities.*

*The internet has the potential to be a wonderful free forum for improving the intelligence of society. Unfortunately, free-thinkers, atheists and humanists have been killed, physically assaulted, threatened, imprisoned, and/or banned from their countries for daring to present the world of nontheism on the internet, through speeches, and in books. The censorship of this valuable information is a critical problem that must be resolved.*

*Nontheists say that blasphemy is a victimless crime. The only people who feel hurt by so-called "blasphemous statements" are the people who take personal offense to their dearly held religious beliefs. In spite of dire consequences, there are many people who continue to reject and speak against religion.*

*The last point I made during my description of the nontheist philosophy was that this one and only life provides us with the opportunity to leave the world a better place. As the climate crisis looms, it will be up to the empowered girls and women to lead and participate in finding scientific solutions to reverse global environmental decline.*

*Realizing that there is no god who can save us and that dogmatic faith does not provide answers to our pressing real-world problems will lead us to one conclusion: the realization that scientific advancements are critically important towards being able to end and resolve the harm we have done to our one and only planetary home. We will need all the brain power, all the strength, and all the will to change in order to survive now — and into the future.*

*I greatly appreciate this opportunity to be here today with all of you to address the empowerment and elevation of women and girls. There is much good to do and very little time in which to accomplish so many tasks — none of which require a belief in gods.*

Pictured above (left to right) in the top row are **Bani Dugal (**Bahá'í representative), **Carole McConkie** (Latter-day-Saints representative), **Kelsey Zorzi** (Zoom Host), and **Blu Greenberg** (Jewish Orthodox representative). **Margaret Downey** is pictured in the large Zoom box.

# *Thomas Paine-Themed "Ask an Atheist" Show*

On March 16, 2021, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) hosted a Facebook Live broadcast of a Thomas Paine-themed *Ask an Atheist* show. Pictured above on the set located in Madison, Wisconsin are co-hosts **Annie Laurie Gaylor** and **Dan Barke**r. Gaylor and Barker are co-presidents of FFRF. The weekly *Ask an Atheist* show is accessed through the FFRF Facebook page. All who "like" and/or "join" the Facebook page will receive an invitation to watch their weekly shows, ask questions, and make comments. The FFRF Facebook page can be found at the following link:

https://www.facebook.com/4ffrf

At the FFRF Facebook page you will also see footage of the *Freethought Matters* television program; "Freethought of the Day" with important current and historical quotations from freethinkers; updates about lawsuits; activism and much more.

The first guest featured on March 16th was cartoonist **Paul Fitzgerald,** who connected from Skype at his home studio in Manchester, England. Fitzgerald talked about his Thomas Paine graphic novel project and shared many of his drawings with the audience. He also displayed some of his favorite Thomas Paine quotations, including:

*"The mind, once enlightened, cannot again become dark."*

*"It is error only, and not the truth, that shrinks from inquiry."*

To learn more about Fitzgerald's graphic novel, visit his Facebook page at:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/368130724309879/

After the Fitzgerald interview, FFRF featured the founder and president of The Freethought Society (FS), **Margaret Downey**. She talked about upcoming Thomas Paine Day (June 8, 2021) and why he should be honored with a statue. Downey announced a new 501(c)3 organization founded specifically to raise funds to place statues of Thomas Paine in areas of significance to his life and work in New York, Pennsylvania, Washington, DC, and New Jersey. The new organization is named "The Thomas Paine Memorial Association." Board members include **Robyn Blumner**, **Andrew Seidel**, Barker, Gaylor, and **Ann Druyan**.

Register for the live online Thomas Paine Day event at:

https://us02web.zoom.us/webinar/register/WN_OAX2WWk3S0CpEVO_i4n5yw

The last guest of the show was world-renowned sculptor **Zenos Frudakis**, who connected through Skype from his Glenside, Pennsylvania studio. Surrounded by his many clay works of art, Frudakis conveyed his excitement about creating a statue of Thomas Paine.

Access the FFRF Thomas Paine-themed show at the following link:

https://www.facebook.com/4ffrf/videos/453981939279171

The three-phase Thomas Paine statue project was launched in 2019 with donations from The Stiefel Freethought Foundation and the James Hervey Johnson Educational Foundation. The second phase was made possible thanks to donations from the Center for Inquiry, FFRF, and FS. Additional financial contributions are being sought to move the project forward to phase three. Earmarked donations can be sent to FS by check (don't forget to specify/earmark this project) or online at:

https://www.ftsociety.org/donate/

# *Atheist or Agnostic? Does It Matter?*

by Herb Silverman

Many people tell me they wouldn't mind if I were an agnostic, but that I shouldn't be so arrogant as to be an atheist.

I used to call myself an agnostic because I could not logically prove whether a god exists, so I took the agnostic position that the existence of a god is unknown — and perhaps unknowable. I was without belief in any gods and thought it highly improbable that any supernatural beings exist. When I learned that this view is consistent with atheism (without a belief in any gods), I became an atheist.

So, my "conversion" from agnosticism to atheism was more definitional than theological. In reality, depending on how terms are defined and their context, I can accurately call myself an atheist or an agnostic, as well as a humanist, secular humanist, secular Jew, freethinker, skeptic, rationalist, infidel, and more.

I'm curious about why people find "atheist" so much more threatening than "agnostic" when self-described "atheists" and self-described "agnostics" often hold identical views about deities. As with atheists, agnostics almost never give equal merit to belief and disbelief. For instance, I can neither prove nor disprove the following:

Claim 1
The universe was created 10 minutes ago and its creator planted false memories in all of us.

Claim 2
Infidels who don't believe in the Flying Spaghetti Monster are condemned to burn for eternity in a vat of hot pasta sauce.

I assume we are all "agnostic" about these two hypotheses, while quite certain that these claims are false. (I'd also call myself an atheist with respect to such claims.) The burden of proof is on the person making the assertion — as it should be with any supernatural claim.

I've seen and participated in a number of debates and discussions about whether God exists, and they often degenerate into playground disputes. The theist demands of the atheist, "Disprove God," while the atheist says to the theist, "Prove God." I'm sometimes told that I made my case for being an agnostic, not an atheist, because I didn't disprove God's existence. In future discussions and debates, I think I'll try the following:

When Christians insist that I'm an agnostic and not really an atheist because I can't demonstrate with absolute certainty that there is no God, I will respond, "Can you demonstrate with absolute certainty that Jesus is Lord? If not, then you are an agnostic, not really a Christian." Perhaps these Christians (or those of other faiths) would then understand that such certainty is an almost impossible standard of knowledge. I'm willing to call myself an agnostic atheist if they'll call themselves agnostic Christians.

The word "proof" or "certainty" means different things to different people. It doesn't work for me when Christians say they have unquestionable faith in God because Jesus came into their hearts, just as it wouldn't work for them were I to say I have unquestionable knowledge that there is no God because no god ever came into my heart. The most I might say about faith is that I have faith in reason, the scientific method, and evidence— and the absence of evidence for any gods is why I'm an atheist.

Many people distrust atheists because atheists don't worry about rewards or punishments in an afterlife. The message that needs to get out is how many non-atheists live like atheists, for all practical purposes, without belief in a judging God involved in the workings of the world. This would include all deists, almost all Unitarians, and a lot of liberal religionists. This would also include many "nones," those who don't identify with any religion. Some "nones" may be religious, but a huge number of them are atheists, agnostics, or humanists who don't want to identify with any kind of label. I even think many politicians would be willing to make known publicly that their actions and policies have nothing to do with belief in an afterlife. It wouldn't surprise me if the category of "functional atheists," those who believe their actions in this life have nothing to do with how or whether they are treated in an afterlife, is larger than just about any religious denomination.

Theists aren't the only ones who argue about atheism versus agnosticism. I've heard atheists refer to agnostics as gutless or cowardly atheists. I've heard agnostics try to denigrate atheists by charging that they go out of their way to offend religious people. Adding humanists and secular humanists to the mix can further divide the nontheistic community. Atheists like to point out that religious belief should be treated as any other kind of belief open to criticism, and that unquestioned faith is a vice with inherent dangers, not a virtue to be respected. Atheists who prefer identifying as humanists would rather look for ways to make this world a better place than talk about gods in which they don't believe. They often try to find common bonds between theists and nontheists, and seek issues on which to cooperate. Atheists, agnostics, and humanists all try to be good without any gods, though humanists usually focus on "good" and atheists on "without any gods."

Here's an interesting distinction between Christians and secularists: Christians have the same unifying word but fight over theology, whereas secularists have the same unifying theology but fight over words. At least our word wars are only rhetorical. Such "verbal" wars over terminology

were hilariously satirized in the *Life of Brian* movie, where people with common interests splinter into the Judean People's Front, the Judean Popular People's Front, with the People's Front of Judea — sometimes forgetting the name of their own group.

To move beyond terminological disputes, in 2002 I helped found the Secular Coalition for America (SCA), whose mission is to increase the visibility of and respect for nontheistic viewpoints and to protect and strengthen the secular character of our government. SCA now has 19 national member organizations, covering the full spectrum of atheists and humanists, including four nontheistic religious organizations. Since its member organizations are educational nonprofits with strict limits on lobbying, SCA incorporated as a political advocacy organization to allow unlimited lobbying on behalf of secular Americans. Fortunately, organizations in the Secular Coalition have stopped sparring over words and cooperate on the 95 percent their members have in common instead of arguing about the other 5 percent. We all disbelieve in the same gods and we want to be fruitful and multiply our community of reason.

My philosophy of life is based less on the Bible than on the title of an old soap opera (which I never watched): *One life to Live*. For atheists, agnostics, and humanists who believe life after death is a myth, the realization that this life is all we have encourages us to make the most of it in pursuit of happiness and fulfillment. This usually requires that we help others to fulfill their needs, too.

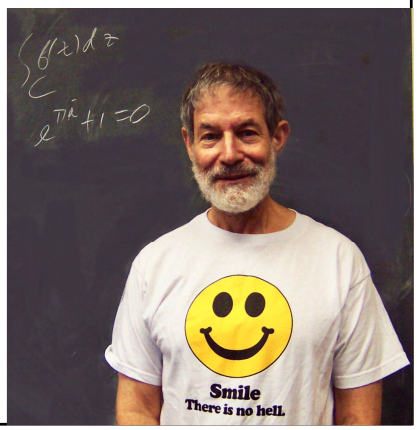
Now, excuse me while I go out to find a good deed to do.

**Herb Silverman** is a regular contributor to the Freethought Society's ezine *The Freethought Society News*. He is a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Mathematics at the College of Charleston.

Silverman is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available through Amazon.com. Designating "The Freethought Society" as your AmazonSmile benefits recipient automatically increases the organization's funds.

Silverman ran for governor of South Carolina in the 1990s to challenge a state law that required religious belief to hold public office.

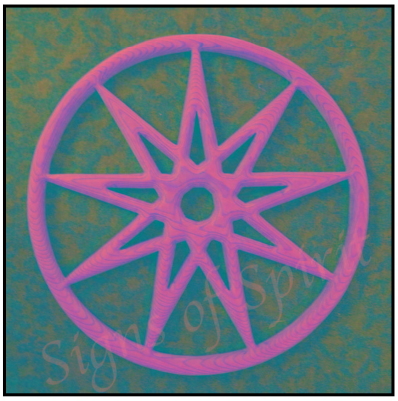
In 1990, a colleague pointed out that atheists were ineligible to hold public office in South Carolina. After an eight-year battle, Herb won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, which struck down this religious test requirement.




# *Learning About Bahá'í Religious Beliefs*

by Margaret Downey

A recent meeting with a representative of the Bahá'í community, spurred my interest in refreshing my knowledge about the Bahá'í religion. Here is some information about that faith that I am pleased to share.



Bahá'í was founded in 1863 by imprisoned Persian nobleman Bahá'u'lláh after a revelation that he was actually a prophet foretold by the Báb — the founder of Bábism, and one of the central figures of the Bahá'í Faith.

Bahá'í seeks to unite humanity through oneness of religion, even though social laws have separated faith and government. Adherents believe in the oneness of God, religion, and humanity; promote harmony and fellowship; seek to develop spiritually; and love their God, who is all-powerful and all-loving. The Bahá'í religion is worldwide, especially prevalent in Asia and Africa.

The sacred text of Bahá'ís the *Kitáb-i-Aqdas (Most Holy Book),* which is Bahá'u'lláh's book of laws, written in Arabic around 1873 while he was still imprisoned within the city of 'Akká. The book was supplemented by later writings and by Bahá'u'lláh's replies to a series of questions posed by one of his secretaries. The first authorized English translation was published in 1992, annotated and accompanied by the supplementary writings and the questions and answers.

Bahá'ís build nine-sided temples that are open to all. A nine-pointed star is a symbol of the Bahá'í religion. The Bahá'í calendar is 19 months of 19 days each — 4 extra days between the 18th and 19th months known as Ayyám-i-Há, which is a time of gift giving.

Followers of Bahá'í are allowed to vote, but cannot join a political party. Alcohol, drugs, gambling, gossip, and same sex marriage are prohibited. The Bahá'í teachings encourage reading and volunteer work. Also, adherents are expected to pray daily; make pilgrimages to Shrines of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh (both in Israel); gather the first day of each 19-day month for the Nineteen Day Feast (a spiritual feast of worship, companionship, and unity); and daylight fasting for the 19-day month before Naw-Rúz (the Bahá'ís New Year recognized at the Spring Equinox).

Bahá'ís pray for world unity and consider that goal as the final stage of humanity's evolution. War and violence is an unacceptable way to spread faith and they are proud to say that no variant sects of Bahá'í exist.

A comparative religion course was required when I attended the Humanist Institute in New City, New York. There are approximately 4,300 religions worldwide, so studying each of them is not possible in a classroom setting and likely not possible in a lifetime. In light of that situation, the Humanist Institute's course required the reading of the book *The World's Religions* by **Huston Smith**.

Not surprising, after reading Smith's book, I and my the fellow Humanist Institute students agreed that atheism was the most logical worldview. ☸

# *The Journey Story of Representative Donald Sternoff Beyer, Jr.*

**Donald Sternoff Beyer**, **Jr.** is an American businessman, diplomat and politician serving as the U.S. Representative for Virginia's 8th congressional district since 2015. A member of the Democratic Party, his district is located in the heart of Northern Virginia and includes Alexandria, Falls Church and Arlington. With his permission, the Freethought Society is proud to share his journey story with readers of *The Freethought Society News*.

With humility, I want to take you on my own spiritual journey, introduce you to my demons, and end with why I joined the Congressional Freethought Caucus and why it is so important.

First, let me freely confess I am no theologian or philosopher. I studied economics and physics in college, and have made my career selling and fixing cars. I proudly note I am the only certified automobile mechanic serving in the United States Congress. Yet cars have changed so much in the last ten years I would not know where to start today. I am just a common man, struggling with the same issues as most of us.

I was baptized Roman Catholic in Trieste, Italy, in 1950, by a priest who could not find a saint named Donald. So I was baptized Danielli!

My mother had a profound conversion experience in her early adulthood, and her Catholicism was strong and devout. My father, on the other hand, was raised in a completely non-theistic home, both parents, and I never once heard him mention the word or idea of God in the 67 years I knew him.

His mother, my grandmother, **Clara Beyer**, was perhaps the strongest influence on my life — an extraordinary humanitarian, liberal, and political leader, who died at age 98. She, too, never spoke of a supreme being in all the years I was close to her. I used to call her every day.

I made my first communion early, at age 5, from a Jesuit missionary in Augusta, Georgia, in the basement of a Baptist church. The priest was afraid it might be my last chance. I was confirmed early, again, in Leavenworth, Kansas, because the Catholic bishop only came to town every ten years.

I was educated at Our Lady of Victory elementary school, where I was a reliable altar boy, and could say the entire Mass in Latin, as altar boys had to in those days. I believe I set the record for the number of times I was named Altar Boy of the Month.

I attended Gonzaga High School, the Jesuit high school a few blocks from the Capitol, where I was president of the Sodality. You can see that, by age 17, I was very fully invested in the Catholic Church. My mother had fantasies of my being the first American Pope. Seriously!

But there were chinks in the armor. At age seven, in Kansas, on the playground, I suffered my first existential moment. Holy crap. I was alone. I realized that I was going to live my life alone. And then I was going to die alone.

The Sisters of Notre Dame, two of whom I loved, taught me that unbaptized babies in Africa could never go to heaven; that Protestants were mostly destined for Hell; and that all I had to do to guarantee heaven was take Holy Communion on nine First Fridays of the Month in a row. None of this was making any sense to me. And then there were the church rules! We were not allowed to eat meat on Fridays, and my mother made the most vile-tasting tuna casseroles and boiled shrimp. I still won't eat fish to this day.

The Jesuits made a vital mistake — they hired a layperson named **Nicholas Fargnoli** to teach 12th grade religion to us at Gonzaga. He had a huge handlebar mustache, rode a motorcycle, and made us read! We read **Paul Tillich**, **Martin Buber**, **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**, and all kinds of challenging reads. It must be no surprise, Mr. Fargnoli was fired after one semester. But the damage was done.

*The Phenomenon of Man*, by the Jesuit geologist **Pierre Teilhard de Chardin**, was particularly important to me. The idea that history has a direction, from alpha to omega, the perfectibility of man, the point of Jesus' incarnation to foreshadow that end point, the perfect man, was where we needed to go. This made way more sense to me than the Baltimore Catechism, a Virgin birth, and the assumption of Mary.

I did love "*Ich und Du*," Buber's notion that we must have a personal relationship with our Creator, and that it required a huge "Leap of Faith." OK, I got that, push aside all the craziness of the theology, "Original Sin," etc. and one should just make that leap into a personal relationship with a loving God.

And then college, where someone gave me a copy of *The Book on the Taboo Against Knowing Who You Are*, by **Alan Watts**. And then *The Wisdom of Insecurity*, also by Watts. The coup de grace was **Peter Matthiessen**'s *The Snow Leopard*. These were very different ways of looking at life and death. So I read *On Being A Christian*, by **Hans Küng**, the Swiss priest who has been censored for his views on papal infallibility (another of those doctrines that made no sense). It was long, powerful, and came down at the end to these eight words. Being a good Christian meant: To live, To act, To suffer, and To die. I was doing all of those — we were all doing all of those.

I took Professor **James Hall**'s course on the Philosophy of Religion — it was excellent exposition of all the cases for the existence and the non-existence of God. In his final pages, he writes that we just cannot know. So he chooses to live his life as an agnostic Episcopalian — a modern day **Blaise Pascal**, betting on an afterlife that may not exist.

My greatest dilemma with my historical Christian faith though has always been theodicy. How can God be all-loving and all-powerful, and there still be so much suffering in the world? If he loved us but was powerless, OK, that makes sense. If he was all-powerful but did not love us, that makes sense, too. But powerful love and all this misery? World wars, the Holocaust, pandemics, man's inhumanity to man obvious everywhere. So, of course, I found a book explaining how religions through the ages explained the theodicy paradox. They don't. The best explanation, again, came from a Jesuit, who simply said, "It's a mystery."

I have had one Catholic priest and two Episcopal priests who were dear friends. The Catholic priest drank himself to death in his 40s. One of the Episcopals is doing fine in retirement. But the other, **Bob Denig**, influenced me greatly. He told me the story of the wandering Jew, whose faith had failed him. He went from rabbi to rabbi trying to find the spiritual wisdom he needed. Each offered him a different interpretation of the Torah and a way to believe and to live. But nothing satisfied him. Finally he met a rabbi who said, "I have been struggling with the same issue all my life. Shall we search together?"

So that is where I am. **Aristotle** said "the presence of timber is not sufficient to build a boat." But then **Immanuel Kant** wrote, "from the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever wrought." I want to believe in the power of prayer. But I DO believe in the laws of physics, how evolution is driven to random changes, the Big Bang, entropy, and especially that our consciousness has arisen from wholly physical processes.

So let me please turn to my demons, our demons. We are going to die. As far as we know, we are the only creatures on the planet with an awareness of our own mortality. We are subject to the terror of a mind that can understand the concept of infinity, one that can see back to the beginning of time and to its end, placed in a creaturely body. **Otto Rank** described us as gods with anuses. **Erwin Becker**, in *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, writes powerfully about how it is in denying our own mortality that we do such evil things. Why else the need to accumulate indefinitely? The need for golden toilets?

Listen to Becker:

> *"What does it mean to be a self-conscious animal? The idea is ludicrous, if it is not monstrous. It means to know that one is food for worms. This is the terror: to have emerged from nothing, to have a name, consciousness of self, deep inner feelings, an excruciating inner yearning for life and self-expression and with all this yet to die. It seems like a hoax, which is why one type of cultural man rebels openly against the idea of God. What kind of deity would create such a complex and fancy worm food?"*

My personal observation: every religion is created and evolved to help us deal with our own mortality. Jesus promises us eternal life. So does Mohammed. The Buddha promises *satori*, sudden enlightenment, if only we will let go. But if there is no supreme being, no God, how do we confront the terror of non-being? **Irvin Yalom** wrote a beautiful book, *Staring into the Sun*, on this exact problem. He offers no easy solution — for we each have to find our own solution, one life at a time.

But here is mine, from **Rainer Maria Rilke**:

> *"All that the rest forget in order to make their life possible, we are always bent on discovering, on magnifying even; it is we who are the real awakeners of our monsters, to which we are not hostile enough to become their conquerors; for in a certain sense we are at one with them; it is they, the monsters, that hold the surplus strength which is indispensable to those that must surpass themselves.*
>
> *"But suddenly we feel our-selves walking beside them, as in a Triumph, without being able to remember the exact moment when this inconceivable reconciliation took place (bridge barely curved that connects the terrible with the tender…)"*

Let me get political at the end. I have four children, none of whom have even the slightest inclination toward God, religion, or church. Religion means 19 Muslims killing 3,000 people and themselves on 9/11, to earn virgins in heaven. It means **Jerry Falwell** and **Jerry Falwell Jr.** and the Moral Majority, which was neither. It means Shiites vs. Sunnis, Catholics vs. Protestants, burning at the stake because you don't believe in baptism. Religion is equivalent to intolerance — of skin color, sexual orientation, class, and on and on. Religion means imposing your rules and practices and beliefs on everyone else. Especially when it comes to sexuality.

Last year, I read *Humanae Vitae*, the 1968 encyclical by Pope Paul the Sixth, which affirmed that Catholics could not use birth control and that abortion was evil. I was looking for the theological rationale that a human life with a soul was present from the moment of conception, the union of the sperm and the ovum. Surprise! It was not there. Yet this has been one of the great dividing lines in our culture for 50 years. Based on what? I DO believe human life is the highest value. But who gets to decide when human life is present?

I was honored to be invited to join the Congressional Freethought Caucus in Congress. Congressman **Jared Huffman** and Congressman **Jamie Raskin** are two men I admire immensely. Together, we will do our best to minimize the impact and influence of religious rules and dogmas and intolerances on our laws and our budgets. If we are a nation founded on freedom, then it is essential that every person be free to think, believe, even worship in their own way — to the extent, of course, that it is lawful and does not impinge on the freedom of others.

I give you one final thought, from **Leonard Cohen**, who died in 2016: "There is a crack in everything. That's how the light gets in.

Representative **Donald Sternoff Beyer, Jr.** is pictured above. He is a proud member of the Congressional Freethought Caucus — a membership organization in the United States House of Representatives established to promote policy solutions based on reason and science, and defend the secular character of government.

Representatives **Jared Huffman** (D-CA), **Jamie Raskin** (D-MD), **Jerry McNerney** (D-CA), and **Dan Kildee** (D-MI) founded the group in April 2018. **Pramila Jayapal** (D-WA) joined shortly thereafter.

Representatives Huffman and Raskin co-chair the caucus. Though officially nonpartisan, currently all 14 members are Democrats. Readers of *The Freethought Society News* are encouraged to tell their Congressional Representatives about the Caucus and encourage them to join.

# *Defending Yourself from Misinformation via Neuroscience*

by Dr. Gleb Tsipursky

Whenever you hear something repeated, it feels more true when you hear it repeated. In other words, repetition makes any statement seem more true. So anything you hear will feel more true each time you hear it again.

Do you see what I did there? Each of the three sentences above conveyed the same message. Yet each time you read the next sentence, it felt more and more true. Cognitive neuroscientists like myself call this the "illusory truth effect."

Go back and recall your experience reading the first sentence. It probably felt strange and disconcerting, perhaps with a tone of outrage, as in "I don't believe things more if they're repeated!"

Reading the second sentence did not inspire such a strong reaction. Your reaction to the third sentence was tame by comparison.

Why? Because of a phenomenon called "cognitive fluency," meaning how easily we process information. Much of our vulnerability to deception in all areas of life — including to fake news and misinformation — revolves around cognitive fluency in one way or another.

Unfortunately, such misinformation can swing major elections. Fortunately, we can take a number of steps to address misinformation and make our public discourse and political system more truthful.

### *The Lazy Brain*

Our brains are lazy. The more effort it takes to process information, the more uncomfortable we feel about it and the more we dislike and distrust it.

By contrast, the more we like certain data and are comfortable with it, the more we feel that it's accurate. This intuitive feeling in our gut is what we use to judge what's true and false.

Yet no matter how often you heard that you should trust your gut and follow your intuition, that advice is wrong. You should not trust your gut when evaluating information where you don't have expert-level knowledge, at least when you don't want to screw up. Structured information gathering and decision-making processes help us avoid the numerous errors we make when we follow our intuition. And even experts can make serious errors when they don't rely on such decision aids.

These mistakes happen due to mental errors that scholars call "cognitive biases." The illusory truth effect is one of these mental blindspots; there are over 100 altogether. These mental blindspots impact all areas of our life, from health and politics to relationships and even shopping.

### *The Danger of Cognitive Fluency and Illusory Truth*

We already make plenty of mistakes by ourselves, without outside intervention. It's especially difficult to protect ourselves against those who know how to manipulate us. Unfortunately, the purveyors of misinformation excel at exploiting our cognitive biases to get us to buy into fake news.

Consider the illusory truth effect. Our vulnerability to it stems from how our brain processes novel stimuli. The first time we hear something new to us, it's difficult to process mentally. It has to integrate with our existing knowledge framework, and we have to build new neural pathways to make that happen.

Next time we hear that same thing, our minds don't have to build new pathways. It just has to go down the same ones it built earlier. Granted, those pathways are little more than trails, newly laid down and barely used. It's hard to travel down that newly established neural path, but much easier than when your brain had to lay down that trail. As a result, the statement is somewhat easier to swallow.

Each repetition widens and deepens the trail. Each time you hear the same thing, it feels more true, comfortable, and intuitive.

Does it work for information that seems very unlikely? Science says yes! Researchers found that the illusory truth effect applies strongly to implausible as well as plausible statements.

What about if you know better? Surely prior knowledge prevents this illusory truth! Unfortunately not: even if you know better, research shows you're still vulnerable to this cognitive bias, though less than those who don't have prior knowledge.

Sadly, people who are predisposed to more elaborate and sophisticated thinking — likely you, if you are reading this article — are more likely to fall for the illusory truth effect. And guess what: more sophisticated thinkers are also likelier than less sophisticated ones to fall for the cognitive bias known as the bias blind spot, where you ignore your own cognitive biases. So if you think that cognitive biases such as the illusory truth effect don't apply to you, you're likely deluding yourself.

That's why the purveyors of misinformation rely on repeating the same thing over and over and over and over again. They know that despite fact-checking, their repetition will sway people, even some of those who think they're invulnerable. In fact, believing that you're invulnerable will make you more likely to fall for this and other cognitive biases, since you won't be taking the steps necessary to address them.

### *Other Important Cognitive Biases*

What are some other cognitive biases you need to beware? If you've heard of any cognitive biases, you've likely heard of the "confirmation bias." That refers to our tendency to look for and interpret information in ways that conform to our prior beliefs, intuitions, feelings, desires, and preferences, predisposing us to words there.

Again, cognitive fluency deserves blame. It's much easier to build neural pathways to information that we already possess, especially that around which we have strong emotions; it's much more difficult to break well-established neural pathways if we need to change our mind based on new information. Consequently, we instead look for information that's easy to accept, that which fits our prior beliefs. In turn, we ignore and even actively reject information that doesn't fit our beliefs.

Moreover, the more educated we are, the more likely we are to engage in such active rejection. After all, our smarts give us more ways of arguing against new information that counters our beliefs. That's why research demonstrates that

the more educated you are, the more polarized your beliefs will be around scientific issues that have religious or political value overtones, such as stem cell research, human evolution, and climate change. Where might you be letting your smarts get in the way of the facts?

Our minds like to interpret the world through stories, meaning explanatory narratives that link cause and effect in a clear and simple manner. Such stories are a balm to our cognitive fluency, as our mind constantly looks for patterns that explain the world around us in an easy-to-process manner. That leads to the "narrative fallacy," where we fall for convincing-sounding narratives regardless of the facts, especially if the story fits our predispositions and our emotions.

You ever wonder why politicians tell so many stories? What about the advertisements you see on TV or video advertisements on websites, which tell very quick visual stories? How about salespeople or fundraisers? Sure, sometimes they cite statistics and scientific reports, but they spend much, much more time telling stories: simple, clear, compelling narratives that seem to make sense and tug at our heartstrings.

Now, here's something that's actually true: the world doesn't make sense. The world is not simple, clear, and compelling. The world is complex, confusing, and contradictory. Beware of simple stories! Look for complex, confusing, and contradictory scientific reports and high-quality statistics: they're much more likely to contain the truth than the easy-to-process stories.

### *Fixing Our Brains*

Unfortunately, knowledge only weakly protects us from cognitive biases; it's important, but far from sufficient, as the study I cited earlier on the illusory truth effect reveals.

What can we do? You can use decision aid strategies to address cognitive biases, not only to defend yourself from misinformation, but also overcome the tide of misinformation destroying our democracy.

One of the most effective strategies is to build up a habit of automatically considering alternative possibilities to any claim you hear, especially claims that feel comfortable to you. Since our lazy brain's default setting is to avoid questioning claims, which require hard thinking, it really helps to develop a mental practice of going against this default.

Be especially suspicious of repeated claims that favor your side's positions without any additional evidence, which play on the illusory truth effect and the confirmation bias combined. Make sure to fact-check them with reliable fact-checking organizations, rather than accepting them because it feels good and right to do so.

Another effective strategy involves cultivating a mental habit of questioning stories in particular. Whenever you hear a story, the brain goes into a listening and accepting mode. Remember that it's very easy to cherry-pick stories to support whatever position the narrator wants to advance. Instead, look for thorough hard numbers, statistical evidence, and peer-reviewed research to support claims.

More broadly, you can make a personal commitment to the twelve truth-oriented behaviors of the Pro-Truth Pledge by signing the pledge at ProTruthPledge.org. All of these behaviors stem from cognitive neuroscience and behavioral economics research in the field called debiasing, which refers to counterintuitive, uncomfortable, but effective strategies to protect yourself from cognitive biases. Peer-reviewed research has shown that taking the Pro-Truth Pledge is effective for changing people's behavior to be more truthful, both in their own statements and in interactions with others.

These quick mental habits will address the most fundamentally flawed aspects of our mind's tendency to accept misinformation.

**Dr. Gleb Tsipursky**, pictured above, is the founder of the Pro-Truth Pledge. He is a well-known thought leader and scholar on using behavioral science to fight misinformation, fake news, and post-truth politics. Dr. Tsipursky is the author of a number of books, including:

*Pro Truth:*
*A Pragmatic Plan to Put Truth Back Into Politics*

*Never Go With Your Gut:*
*How Pioneering Leaders Make the Best Decisions and Avoid Business Disasters*

*The Blind Spots:*
*How to Overcome Unconscious Cognitive Bias and Build Better Relationships*

*The Truth-Seeker's Handbook:*
*A Science-Based Guide*

*Resilience:*
*Adapt and Plan for the New Abnormal of the COVID-19 Coronavirus Pandemic*

All books are available through Amazon.com.

Designating "The Freethought Society" (Pocopson, Pennsylvania) as your AmazonSmile benefits recipient automatically increases the organization's funds.

# *Dr. Robert E. Kay: His Life Remembered*

## *Obituary:*

On March 3, 2021, **Dr. Robert E. Kay,** age 89 of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania died at home of COVID-19. He is survived by his partner of 16 years, **Susan O'Connell,** and his three children **Pamela**, **Jeffrey**, and **Stephen**, daughters in-law **Roz** and **Kathy**, two granddaughters, grand sons-in-law, and a great-granddaughter.

Dr. Kay was born on May 28, 1931 in New York City. He was the only child of **Edward Kay** and **Eleanor (Wolfe) Kay.** He grew up in the New York City area and London, England. He married **Mollyann Keat** on June 5, 1953. The Kays moved to the Philadelphia area in 1967. The couple divorced in 1972.

Dr. Kay was an Eagle Scout, Army Major, and a graduate of Brown University and Tufts Medical School. His psychiatry practice was focused on helping the most severely mentally ill juvenile delinquents and drug addicts.

Dr. Kay's interests included music, especially classical and jazz. He enjoyed listening to music at the Curtis Institute for many years. He was an avid reader who was proud of his extensive home library and book collection.

His interests varied but always included writing about children and schools. He enthusiastically encouraged home schooling and structured schooling of children. He was known for sharing his views on these topics via mail and verbally to any person who had the patience to listen. His aim was to make a difference. He was kind to others, often stepping in to help when asked.

He was actively involved in the Main Line Unitarian Church, the Philadelphia Ethical Society, and The Freethought Society (FS). Dr. Kay was, in fact, a Founding Member of FS and served as a board member for twenty years. He will be remembered fondly for his generosity and devotion to freedom of thought and the separation of religion and government.

Dr. Kay will be interred alongside his parents at the Main Line Unitarian Church. A memorial service will be held in the future.

## *Susan O'Connell's Reflections:*

My sweet Bob died the morning of Wednesday, March 3, 2021. He was the love of my life.

Bob and I met at a meeting of the Freethought Society (FS) at the Ludington Library. He was 73 and I was nearly 46. First he asked, since we were both coming to the FS meetings from Philadelphia, would I like to ride in with him. I immediately said "yes." I didn't think anything of it. We were just saving gas.

Then, soon after, he asked, since we were riding in together to the meetings, if I would like to stop sometimes and have a little dinner on the way. Why not, I thought. There was a little Greek place a few blocks from the library so we started going there. The restaurant was small and charming, but the service was very slow. We learned that it would be wise to ask for the check soon after you got the food.

One day Bob arrived to pick me up at our rendezvous point wearing a blue suit, dress shirt and a colorful tie. He looked great. I thought he must have come from a meeting. When we were done eating he looked me in the eye and asked, since I was divorced, had I thought about trying again. I stared at him. Was this good looking, retired doctor asking me out? I couldn't believe it. I looked around the restaurant and nearly yelled "Waiter!" I just wanted to get out of there and start our dating scenario! We left, and I took his arm. I've never let go since that time.

Our first formal date was at the Curtis Institute of Music. I never much liked classical music, but it was exciting to see these incredibly talented young people from all over the world playing their hearts out.

Soon thereafter Bob got tickets for an avant garde "modern classical" concert by the Philadelphia Classical Symphony. It was held in a beautiful old church, First Baptist, at 17th and Sansom. After the concert they put out a large buffet of all kinds of finger foods. I was so grateful that at least the food was enjoyable as I had hated the concert. We got in Bob's car and he automatically turned on the radio to the same kind of music. I reached over and turned it off. It was either that or scream. Talking was more enjoyable than his choice of music!

At that time I was renting a room in New Jersey. Soon it became a storage area for my stuff. I was almost never in it, instead spending my days and nights with Bob. One day I opened the door to the house and my landlady actually asked me what I was doing there, before she remembered that I paid her rent for the use of one room.

Bob and I had nearly 16 years together. Knowing him and loving him changed my life. Before Bob I dated every crude, rude, nasty, overbearing, self-absorbed and even violent male I could find. In Bob I found a prince. It actually took me a while to adjust to being treated so well.

One day, early in our relationship, Bob said he would pick me up after work. At the time I worked at the Academy of Natural Sciences as a secretary. I was delayed getting out of work and had lost track of time. My stomach was in a knot. My experience with my ex-husband had taught me never to be late. I saw that it was about 45 minutes past the time I was due at the car. I rushed to the car and started a string of explanations, "I'm so sorry. I got busy with something and it was important and…" Bob looked at me like I was crazy. He said "Oh were you late? I was reading the paper." I thought, "You are never getting away from me."

I understand what people mean when they say of their loved one, "He completes me." Now I am without my sweet Bob. I know myself differently because of him and our life together. My wish for others is that they can have even a small bit of the love and acceptance I had with Bob.

In the time since Bob died people have been wonderful. As notices go out, people call. Everyone has praise or a cute story or gratitude for routine calls he made or cards he sent or even the crazy "pieces of paper" he handed out to inform about the evils of the school system. Everyone loved Bob. I just wish he were here making kissing sounds, wiggling his fingers to motion a hello or just fixing me with those soft blue eyes. There's no sight I'd rather see. □

# *Freethought Society Four-Month Zoom Calendar*

To participate in the online Zoom events listed below, you must be a member of the Freethought Society Meetup group.
Join the Freethought Society (FS) Meetup group at: www.meetup.com/Freethought-Society-Meetup/
Each event will have a Zoom URL link listed in the description of the event.
FS meetings will implement security features and will be recorded for replay on social media.
Those who join the meeting consent to be recorded and agree to abide by the FS Anti-Harassment and Code of Conduct Policy.

## *May 6*

On **Thursday**, **May 6**, **2021**, please join the Freethought Society, Recovering From Religion, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Secular Student Alliance and the Secular Coalition for America as we celebrate The National Day of Reason by hosting a Zoom entertainment extravaganza entitled "Mayday for Humanity." The event will begin at **4:00 PM PDT/7:00 PM EDT**.

Comedians **Leighann Lord** and **Ian Harris** will co-host this free 3-hour event. They will usher in an array of comedians, poets, and musical performers. Donations will be accepted through: bit.ly/MAYDAY4HUMANITY All proceeds will benefit homeless shelters and food banks selected by the co-sponsors. Beneficiary organizations operate in a non-discriminatory manner.

The program will be interspersed with messages from co-sponsors, celebrity supporters, and people who are conducting grassroots community service projects during the 2021 Secular Week of Action (April 30-May 9).

Visit the FS website and Facebook page for more information about the sponsors, a list of entertainers. Visit the below link to bid on the fantastic online auction items:

http://auction.ftsociety.org

## *June 8*

Join FS, the Thomas Paine National Historical Association (TPNHA), the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and the American Humanist Association (AHA) as we celebrate the 2021 **Thomas Paine Day** via Zoom on **Tuesday**, **June 8**, **2021**. Register for the event by clicking: Thomas Paine Day Celebration

The program begins at **3:45 PM PDT/6:45 PM EDT** with a 15-minute Thomas Paine-themed concert by songwriter and recording artist **James Klueh**. BYOB to participate in toasts throughout the event. **Melissa Myers** (representing CFI) and **Margaret Downey** (representing FS) are the event co-hosts.

After a welcome from **Congressman Jamie Raskin** and the co-sponsors, a summary of the life and work of Paine will be presented in sections by co-sponsor representatives:

**Mandisa Thomas** (AHA)
**Tom Flynn** (CFI)
**Annie Laurie Gaylor** and **Andrew Seidel** (FFRF)
**Margaret Downey** (FS)
**Gary Berton** (TPNHA)

Sculptor, **Zenos Frudakis** will share an update on the progress of the Thomas Paine statue project and **Dan Barker,** co-president of FFRF, will perform his original song *The World is My Country*. After a short break the question-and-answer portion of the event will begin. Toasts and favorite Paine quotations are welcome.

## *July 10*

FS is pleased to host **Kate Forest**, a Life Cycles Officiant for the Jewish Children's Folkshul and Adult Community in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on **Saturday**, **July 10, 2021**. The Zoom event will begin at **11:45 AM PDT/2:45 PM EDT**.

Folkshul welcomes all who want to be part of our Jewish community including, but not limited to, folks who are: culturally Jewish, agnostic, atheist, spiritual, self-identified Jewish, Jew-ish, Jew-curious, in an interfaith family, LGBTQ, leaving Judaism, returning to Judaism, freethinkers, humanists, grandparents, singles, couples, and parents-trying-to-give-their-kids-good-values-and-a-cultural-identity-in-a-non-religious-setting. Everyone is welcome!

Forest's speech is entitled "Jewish without God: Living a meaningful Secular Jewish Life." She will describe the many branches of the Jewish tree. Most of these branches are theistic, but increasingly, Jews are defining them-selves as nonbelievers or atheists. Secular Humanistic Judaism allows Jews to retain a cultural Jewish identity without practicing a religion that is incompatible with their beliefs. Despite objections from some Jewish communities, Secular Jews provide an inclusive, relevant experience.

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to obtain the Zoom link to participate in this event.

## *August 13*

Nowhere in the entire world has there been a Friday the Thirteenth online anti-superstition bash until now! Please join the Freethought Society and the Center for Inquiry as we cure people of their superstitions during the virtual opening of the famous Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center on **Friday**, **August 13**, **2021** at **3:45 PM PDT/6:45 PM EDT**. During the Pre-Event Social a slide show of past party photos will be shown synchronized to superstition-themed music.

Friggatriskaidekaphobia doctors and nurses will provide long-distance treatments that will involve humorous and fun-loving interaction as superstitions are dispelled and cured. A "Clean Bill of Mental Health" will be awarded to participants who participate and follow the "doctor's orders." Don't miss your chance to take an anti-horoscope consulting pledge and participate in trashing your Zodiac sign. Join us by sitting under a ladder or umbrella. Prizes for the best Zoom box will be awarded.

The Friggatriskaidekaphobia Treatment Center will be offering a continuing education session with famous Skeptic and "Anti-Superstition Professor" **Benjamin Radford**. His presentation is entitled "The Curse of Magical Thinking."

Please refer to the Meetup link information under the headline of this page to learn how to obtain the Zoom link to participate in this event.

The Freethought Society (FS) promotes freedom of thought, expression, and choice. FS also advocates separation of religion and government. We assist nontheists, educate the public about nontheism, and provide social opportunities where like-minded individuals can meet, socialize and share ideas.

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 via Zoom or in-person if possible. 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 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 or scan and email this form to: Ezine@FtSociety.org

# *Volunteer Opportunities Through the Freethought Society*

Supporters of FS often want to do more than just make a financial contribution. Listed below are committees designed to fulfill the mission, goals, and vision of FS. Volunteers are needed in all committees listed. Please 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 donations)

**Literature Placement for Prisoners**
(providing literature to prison libraries)

**Meetup Committee**
(planning events)

**Monthly Meeting Coordinators**
(schedule, 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 donations)

**Thomas Paine Memorial Committee**
(work on themed events)

**Tree of Knowledge/Winter Display Committee**
(promote and support the concept nationwide)