White Evangelicals Create Atheists

by Herb Silverman

I'd like to say that atheist activists deserve the credit for people leaving religion, but lately I have come to think White Evangelical Protestants deserve a lot of credit, too. President **Donald Trump** has inadvertently exposed the hypocrisy of many White Evangelicals who voted for him and continue to support him despite his deplorable behavior in office, including his unapologetic sexual harassment, adultery, and overall dishonesty. Do they now suggest that a president's religious beliefs might not matter? Many seem driven by Trump's attacks on abortion rights, immigrants, African Americans, women's equality, gun control, science, climate change, and other social issues.

Some White Evangelicals recognize the dangers of climate change and welcome it as the biblically-predicted Apocalypse. They believe that God is using climate change to enact His wrath on the world. They quote 2 Peter 3:10:

> *"The day of the Lord will come like a thief, in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up."*

Some who want to "Make America Great Again" long for the days of white privilege when they could discriminate against those of a different race and those who had non-Christian religious beliefs or no religious beliefs. They would also like to use their privilege to take away rights from the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community. Some White Evangelicals (called Christian nationalists) want to turn America into a Christian nation, replacing the secular nation we are currently. They represent this Republican president's base supporters. I know some atheists and humanists who consider themselves Republicans, but I have yet to meet one who supports Trump.

Surely a lot of Christians recognize the danger of ignoring social justice issues to focus exclusively on an anti-abortion agenda. Some might even worry that religious leaders are selling their own souls for personal power and political influence instead of pursuing their more traditional mission of saving souls.

It's difficult to determine what Christian principles Donald Trump embraces, unless you consider it Christian to nominate judges put forth by conservative White Evangelicals. I know he disagrees with Luke 6:29: "If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek." (I couldn't find a biblical passage that says "Slap him back ten times harder.") Nor does Trump follow Luke 14:1: "He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Many of us wish Trump would heed Proverbs 12:15: "The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice."

One of my favorite Trump lies occurred during his 2016 campaign. He said he couldn't disclose his tax returns because of audits (though he could, if he wanted to), adding, "Maybe I get audited so much because I'm a strong Christian." Really? How much faith does that statement require? I think Donald Trump is an atheist because I can't picture him believing in a power higher than himself. On the other hand, Trump might think that he is a god.

Some Christian conservatives have apologized many times for being on the wrong side of history, including issues of slavery, misogyny, and anti-Semitism, positions that can be found in the Bible. I believe Christians will one day admit to and apologize for metaphorically embracing Trump as a false savior.

When it comes to abortion, which seems to be the Christian Right's main concern, I cannot find a biblical statement made against a woman's right to choose. Jesus was silent about this issue. Evangelicals also fail to acknowledge that their God performs the most abortions because at least half of fetuses are spontaneously aborted, referred to as a miscarriage, often before the woman even knows she is pregnant.

When a culture matures enough to find statements in ancient "holy" books to be ridiculous, believers either ignore such portions or find creative interpretations for what God really meant. Atheists decide how best to behave without appealing to divine authority or so-called "holy books," and they treat the Bible like any other book written by humans, agreeing only with passages that make sense to them.

Many Americans wrongly believe that tax dollars should go to support Christian symbols and beliefs, feeling that Christians are under attack and deserve special rights. With conservative American churches losing the moral authority they once possessed, and losing members, they are pursuing government support. But as **Benjamin Franklin** said:

> *"When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."*

It doesn't bode well for separation of religion and government that white Christian nationalists currently have such influence over the government. With Trump's blessing, they have introduced legislation to bring back school-sponsored prayers and demand that sex education classes in public schools teach "abstinence only" instead of preparing teens to avoid pregnancy and disease. They also want to promote anti-science religious teachings, discriminate in foster care and adoption, and pass religious refusal in healthcare.

I see no difference between the refusal of county clerks to grant marriage licenses to gay couples today and the refusal to grant such licenses to interracial couples in previous generations based on "Christian" beliefs. Invoking religion to refuse to bake wedding cakes for gay couples is no different from invoking religion to refuse to serve black people at a lunch counter. Religious freedom gives you the right to practice your belief, not the right to discriminate against those who don't share your beliefs.

President Trump has appointed more than 200 judges, most of whom seem hostile to the separation of religion and government. He has ordered every department in the Executive

Branch to work on faith-based partnerships, and created the "White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative," an office that undermines religious freedom by giving taxpayer money to religious groups and allowing them to discriminate with little accountability and no transparency.

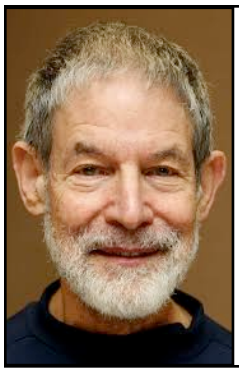
Not only are Trump's cabinet members very religious but they also seem to oppose the separation of religion and government, blaming secularism for what they consider societal ills. **Ben Carson**, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, referred to the separation of religion and government as "crap" prompted by "political correctness." Attorney General **William Barr** said, "The separation of church and state is for losers, liberals, and America-hating atheists." Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo**, on the State Department website, said he swore an oath to the Constitution, but added, "My first calling is to my Savior."

As a freshman at Temple University in October 1960, I was in the audience when Catholic presidential candidate **John F. Kennedy** campaigned there. I appreciated the religious diversity he had advocated the previous month when he assured Protestant ministers in Houston that he believed in an America "where the separation of church and state is absolute." True to his word, and as the first Catholic president, Kennedy gave evidence-based secular arguments for his decisions. A secular Constitution, where the separation of religion and government is absolute, helped make America great. Whatever you think about Trump wanting to build a wall between Mexico and the United States, we must not let him tear down the wall between religion and government.

The good news is that "nones," people who are religiously unaffiliated, are the fastest growing religious demographic in the country, comprising nearly one-quarter of all Americans (more than Catholics or evangelicals). Not all are atheists or agnostics, but a significant percentage are — especially among young adults. As our culture becomes more diverse, it offers more openness toward other points of view. The internet has played a significant role in empowering young people with inquiring minds to learn about countless religious beliefs, and a lot of them have examined the available evidence and stopped believing in any gods.

Many disliked the white nationalist "Christian values" they were being taught or the political influence their churches exerted on issues like LGBTQ and women's rights, not to mention the negative effect of scandals like pedophilia. And there's no doubt that the abundance of influential scientific findings marginalizes even more the outdated teachings in some religions. The "nones" are being welcomed by atheists and humanists who support civil rights and social justice issues. There are some former and perhaps current Christians who now believe that humanist positions are more consistent with the message of Jesus than with the message of White Evangelicals.

When religion mingled with politics is no longer business as usual, then we together can make America even greater. ◻



Herb Silverman is regular contributor to *The Freethought Society News* ezine/newsletter. He is the author of two books, *Candidate Without a Prayer* and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land*. Both books are available on Amazon.com. Designating the Freethought Society as your benefit recipient automatically increases the organization's funds.

Message From Margaret Downey

On Sunday, August 16, 2020 the Freethought Society (FS) Board of Directors hosted a zoom birthday party to help me celebrate my 70th trip around the sun. At one point in the event there were over 100 people in attendance. It lasted almost four hours!

Michael Steven Martin was the host and he worked closely with **Heidi Ickes** (the FS Executive Assistant). Martin did a wonderful job managing the Zoom technology which involved showing videos, working the chat and initiating the spotlight function. He started the event with a slide show of biographical information which included photos of my childhood, family members, my projects, special events, and much more.

Thanks to the pre-event work done by Ickes, friends from all over the country responded to the Zoom party notification. The entire event was recorded and can be viewed at the following link: https://youtu.be/r0XAqNo3Fuw

I am very grateful to all the people who attended the party. I also thank the wonderful folks who sent videotaped birthday greetings for the party, gifts, birthday cards, and donations to FS. The earmarked donations help me to continue my activist work as the proud founder and president of FS. Many thanks and love to all. ◻