

Leonard Presberg on “Vote for Me—I’m an Atheist!”

AFS has the honor and pleasure to have a national activist and freethinker, Leonard Presberg, the Founder and President of the Association of Secular Elected Officials (ASEO), talk with us.



Leonard Presberg

The talk, as Presberg described it: “will be me discussing my experiences ‘coming out’ as an atheist politician, why atheists and humanists need to be politically active, and my work organizing atheist and humanist politicians across the country.” ASEO is affiliated with the Secular Coalition for America.

We often hear talks on religion and politics, but we’re delighted that we’ll learn something this time about politicians and irreligion, from someone who understands both.

Leonard Presberg served as a member of the Fayette County School Board from 2011 to 2022 and is a former Chair of the Fayette Democratic Committee. He founded the Association of Secular Elected Officials as a support and education network that he wished existed since he was attacked for being nonreligious in his first month of office.

Presberg graduated with a BA from Oberlin College and a JD, magna cum laude, from University of Richmond. He is a former preschool teacher and currently serves as the CFO for Women’s Medical Center. He currently serves as a Mentor to several students enrolled in Fayette County Schools, on the Board of the Fayette County Education Foundation, and as the founder of the Red Clay Storytelling Festival. Leonard previously was a volunteer in various nonprofits such as AVPRIDE, PTOs, youth sports leagues, and the United Way. He also plays a lot of pickleball.

Leonard and Elizabeth Presberg have three children, a dog, three cats, chickens, ducks, and multiple other creatures living with and around them.

The Presberg program, free and open to the

Calendar

Jan 14	Potluck lunch	11:30 am
Jan 14	General Meeting (Live/Online)	1 pm
Feb 11	Board Meeting	11:30 am
Feb 11	General Meeting (Live/Online)	1 pm

All events are combo Live/Zoom unless noted and are subject to change.

public, will be preceded by a few minutes of Zoom-and-in-person-based socializing starting about 12:30 P.M. Eastern Standard Time in the US, for any interested. We welcome those who are not freethinkers but who just want to know more about electoral politics, freethought, secular humanism, and church & state. All freethinkers are of course welcome—and we hope that they will decide to join as members in due course. Details (the same as last month) on the Zoom meeting number, etc., can be had from Presberg or from any member of the AFS Board or from Program Chair (for a bit longer—but only a bit) Ed Buckner.

AFS January 8 Meeting Jan. 14, 2024 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

To join Zoom meeting go to this link:
us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911
Also at Atlanta Freethought Hall

The January Potluck

Before the Jan 14th meeting we will have a Potluck Lunch, starting at 11:30. Join AFS members and guests for some good food and great socializing. Please bring food according to the first letter of your last name:

- A-G: Bring a dessert**
- H-P: Bring a side dish**
- Q-Z: Bring a main dish**

AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.

For the latest in upcoming AFS events, join our Meetup group!
meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society

Programs and Speakers

All programs are on the second Sunday of each month at AF Hall, 4775 N. Church Lane SE, Atlanta, GA, 30339 and also presented online (see link on page 1). Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:30 for socializing. Visitors are always welcome.

The views and opinions expressed by speakers at AFS do not necessarily reflect those of AFS members or its policy. Announced events are subject to change.



- 14 Jan Leonard Presberg - Association of Secular Elected Officials
11 Feb Antonio Daza
10 Mar TBA
14 Apr TBA

AFS Email List

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The Atlanta Freethought Society is a member-run organization dedicated to advancing freethought and protecting the rights and reputation of freethinkers, agnostics, atheists and humanists.

We welcome anyone who is interested in learning about living a good life free from religion through attending AFS speeches, debates, and discussions. We employ protests, letters to the editor, broadcast appearances, and any other reasonable and civil means available to achieve our mission.

We define freethought as “the forming of opinions about life in general and religion in particular on the basis of reason and the evidence of our senses, independently of tradition, authority, or established belief.”

We actively support a strict separation of church and state as the best means to guarantee liberty for all, regardless of religious belief or lack of belief.

We seek to educate ourselves on many topics but especially on religion and non-religion. We do this through a series of thought-provoking speakers and programs, and by maintaining a web forum and an extensive library of freethought, religious, and related books, pamphlets, videotapes, and audiotapes.

We provide an organization where freethinkers and non-theists can develop friendships, talk freely, socialize and enjoy each other’s company. We do not discriminate against anyone on such irrelevant grounds as race, sexual orientation, age, gender, class, or physical disability. We welcome members and leaders of all political parties and preferences. Any who are like-minded are welcome to join us.

Because we are designated by the IRS as a 501(c)(3) educational organization, contributions to AFS are tax deductible.

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Faith—Why Don't Atheists Have It?

by Ed Buckner • Letters to a Free Country

Faith—why don't atheists have it? Two short answers: *in what?* and *why?*

Quite seriously, believer (in God, whatever your particular religion or denomination, etc.), do you honestly not realize that the atheist you're asking to "have faith" doesn't see any good reason—any logic or enough evidence—to accept what you believe is true? And that the atheist therefore of course cannot unreasonably just suspend his disbelief and have faith in something.

As arguably the greatest American satirist put it, "Having faith is believing in something you just know ain't true."



**Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens)
(1835-1910)**

- Mark Twain, *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

Imagine, dear believer, that you don't think something is true that someone else thinks is true and important enough to try to persuade you. Maybe that their home State is superior to yours or that Italian food is better than English food. Do you think you'd be moved in their direction at all by someone saying, "You just have to have faith that Nebraska is better than Nevada"?

It's not merely that the atheist honestly isn't some cold-hearted Mr. Spock who has no emotions and acts only based on stiff, unyielding logic.

The atheist, whether in your opinion justified or not, has no god-belief, by definition. Therefore urging him (me) to have faith ignores the necessary prior question(s).

Many, many atheists have written on faith, from the late **Carol Faulkenberry** to **Richard Dawkins**.

Carol defined it in her book, *An Uppity Old Atheist Woman's Dictionary*—

Faith: An induced state of insanity that allows one to believe that a god who supposedly drowned all the world and later killed all the first-born sons in Egypt is indeed a good, loving, just, and merciful god.

Believers often insist that faith is a good thing, sometimes even an obviously good thing that should be taken for granted as desirable. A common expression of this is:

What is *faith*? It is trust, assurance and confidence in God. Living *faith* is shown by service and obedience to God. How can we increase our *faith*?

But first, why does it need to be increased?

The biblical definition is:

Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.—Hebrews 11:1

Are atheists mean-spirited to refuse to have faith? The answer to that question is necessarily dependent on, as I wrote at the beginning of this Letter, the answer to "in what"? First persuade me of the meaning of the "what"—then I'll consider whether it's a good thing to have faith.

Can Faith Be Effective or Useful?

Let's be clear—I'm not saying that faith doesn't change things or that faith cannot move men (though not mountains). Beyond any reasonable doubt, faith can be effective, powerful, and can make a difference. But the

questions, often unresolvable questions regarding religion, still firmly apply: faith in what? why?

Any doubt about the power of faith should be ended by considering 19 men with strong enough faith to knowingly, unhesitatingly, sacrifice their own lives in fiery, abrupt, painful ways. The terrorists in the four airplanes that crashed into buildings in New York City, the Pentagon, and (though not their intended destination), the field in Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, were, whatever else they were, indisputably men of faith. That faith gave them complete confidence that they were doing what Allah wanted, that they would become not only honored martyrs but would immediately be admitted to heaven. Their faith-based initiative was, from their perspective and that of Al-Qaeda, wildly and profoundly successful. To argue against their mission, as I certainly do, you have to question not the strength of their faith but the objects of that faith.

To paraphrase Nobel-Prize winning physicist **Steven Weinberg** only slightly,

With or without faith, good people can behave well and bad people can do evil; but for good people to do evil - that takes faith.

Is Having Faith Obviously a Virtue?

Aside from the simple fact that it makes no kind of sense to urge an atheist to "have faith," why would anyone see faith as a virtue, as many believers seem to think it is, even when we agree that the object sought is a good one? Any definition of faith I have seen or can imagine suggests putting reason, logic, evidence, and even careful thinking aside and essentially believing in and trusting in the truth of something without any sound basis for believing or trusting.

Remember, try to see it from the unfaithful perspective. Maybe you think that accepting some idea you hold dear or important even though another sees no grounds for doing so is wise even without a basis—but, again, what if it's the other way around? What if someone wants you to take his word for some great "truth" instead of telling you why you should believe? And insists you should just "have faith" and that doing so is a virtue, a plus.

I mentioned **Richard Dawkins**, who has written about faith often. Here's what he wrote, in *The God Delusion*, about seeing faith as a virtue—

... what is really pernicious is the practice of teaching children that faith itself is a virtue. Faith is an evil precisely because it

Faith continued on pg 4

Faith continued from pg 3

requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them – given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades. Immunized against fear by the promise of a martyr’s paradise, the authentic faith-head deserves a high place in the history of armaments, alongside the long-bow, the warhorse, the tank and the cluster bomb. If children were taught to question and think through their beliefs, instead of being taught the superior virtue of faith without question, it is a good bet that there would be no suicide bombers. Suicide bombers do what they do because they really believe what they were taught in their religious schools: that duty to God exceeds all other priorities, and that martyrdom in his service will be rewarded by eternal bliss. And they were taught that lesson not necessarily by extremist fanatics but by decent, gentle, mainstream religious instructors, who lined them up in their madrasas, sitting in rows, rhythmically nodding their innocent little heads up and down while they learned every word of the holy book like demented parrots. Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong.

Why Don't Atheists Want God in Their Lives?

On a related point—in this case from **Jason Wiltse** on Facebook (I don't know him and he's very unlikely to see this or to be in position to defend it. [If anyone sees it who happens to know him, invite him to comment on the Substack, as anyone can, unmolested [extreme statements excepted])—

God will show his existence in your life if you want him in your life. What atheists want is a rude God who pushes his way into your life. Funny how the atheist does not want anything to do with God while still demanding God or Christians to prove it. You're asking him to

push his way into your life or you will not believe, while telling him to back off, how ironic.

And Jason also wrote, later—

When you were revealed that there was a God you chose to deny the chance to have a relationship with him. You can get your own proof the point is you don't want the proof because you don't want a relationship where you have to live for a God not for your own sins. In fact, you would rather work for Satan trying to convince people not to believe. This is the sad plight of most atheist they argue against God and his people and pretend that they are good people while they support the one who is destroying souls even their own.

If “atheist” is defined (correctly and reasonably) as merely someone who holds no belief in any gods, then of course the atheist cannot have faith and also cannot logically want “a rude God who pushes his way into your life” or choose “to deny the chance...”. These aren't “ironic”—they are nonsensical. In fact of course what atheists want is for believers to leave them alone or to explain why the atheist should become a believer—and that's a subject for (provably) endless debate.

Keep the faith, baby—but keep it to yourself.

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Messing with freedom: Texas abortion ban provides a glimpse of creeping theocracy

by Rachel Laser • [AU.org](https://www.aunet.org)

Editor's note: This blog post by AU President and CEO Rachel Laser originally appeared in the January 2024 issue of AU's Church & State magazine.

You've probably read about the situation involving **Kate Cox** in Texas. Cox went to court seeking an emergency abortion because her fetus had been diagnosed with a lethal genetic condition called Trisomy 18, and continuing her pregnancy entailed serious health risks.

Cox's doctor told the court that it was her "good faith belief and medical recommendation" that Cox should be allowed to have an abortion, citing Cox's "life-threatening physical condition aggravated by, caused by, or arising from her current pregnancy that places her at risk of death or poses a serious risk of substantial impairment of her reproductive functions."

The lower court granted Cox an exemption from the state's draconian abortion ban, but the Texas Supreme Court reversed that ruling. Cox had to leave the state to get the procedure.

Prior to the Texas Supreme Court's ruling, Attorney General **Ken Paxton** sent a letter to hospitals in the area announcing that he would charge any doctor who performed an abortion for Cox with a first-degree felony. In Texas, this type of felony can be punished by a term of five to 99 years in prison.

Draconian laws proposed

Cox got the abortion, but let's not forget that lawmakers in some states have proposed arresting women who get abortions elsewhere, and in Texas, several communities have passed policies that make it a crime to use local roads to transport someone to get an abortion.

Here is where I need to take a deep breath. As a woman, mother and American, I am still solidly in the "anger" phase of the five phases of grief. I agree with what a friend told me: "As a parent, I'm only more in favor of abortion rights than I used to be, and I already was solidly there. I don't want **Ken Paxton** telling my daughter where to park her car, let alone what she can do with her own body."

As a Generation X woman who always knew

that abortion was available if need be, I have fought my own emotional denial about the state of our country, even while intellectually I knew that abortion rights were imperiled. And as someone who grew up in a world where abortion was protected by the right to privacy and felt stable, I didn't have to spend much time focusing on resistance to abortion, let alone on how that resistance was driven by a religious extremist agenda.

Abortion bans and church-state separation

Obviously, that changed when I took the helm at Americans United almost six years ago. Americans United has been warning about theocracy for years. Some people said we were overreacting. But look at what is happening in Texas (and elsewhere). What else do you call it when women can no longer get a necessary medical procedure that was legal everywhere as recently as two years ago because of someone else's religious beliefs?

Abortion bans impose one narrow religious viewpoint on all of us. As Justice **Sonia Sotomayor** noted during the oral argument in the *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* case that overturned *Roe v. Wade*:

"How is your interest anything other than a religious view?" Does it surprise anyone that Paxton has urged Christians to "be bold" in standing up for "religious freedom"?

Americans United is determined to recommit this nation to true religious freedom, and the overreach of Christian Nationalists today is helping.

AU fights for reproductive rights in Missouri

Consider AU's abortion-ban lawsuit in Missouri, where lawmakers boasted about the religious motivations for their abortion bans and even inserted religious language into the law. Our lawsuit on behalf of 14 clergy from seven different

religious denominations is moving forward. It's restoring hope to many Missourians who have long been looking for ways to be proactive in the face of widespread Christian Nationalism in that state. The lawsuit has energized Missourians, deepened relationships between the religious and abortion-rights communities and elevated the importance and relevance of church-state separation.

The threat of theocracy is no longer a threat — it's real in places like Missouri and Texas. But just as real is the difference even a single voice can make. **Kate Cox** bravely went to court, and even though (outrageously) she didn't win her case, she brought attention to the danger of abortion bans.

I know it's not always clear-cut how to fight today's creeping theocracy, and our members have different comfort levels with different types of advocacy. One of our key jobs is to keep you informed and give you options for actions you can take. Together, and with patience, we can build the power to let even Texas know: "Don't mess with church-state separation."

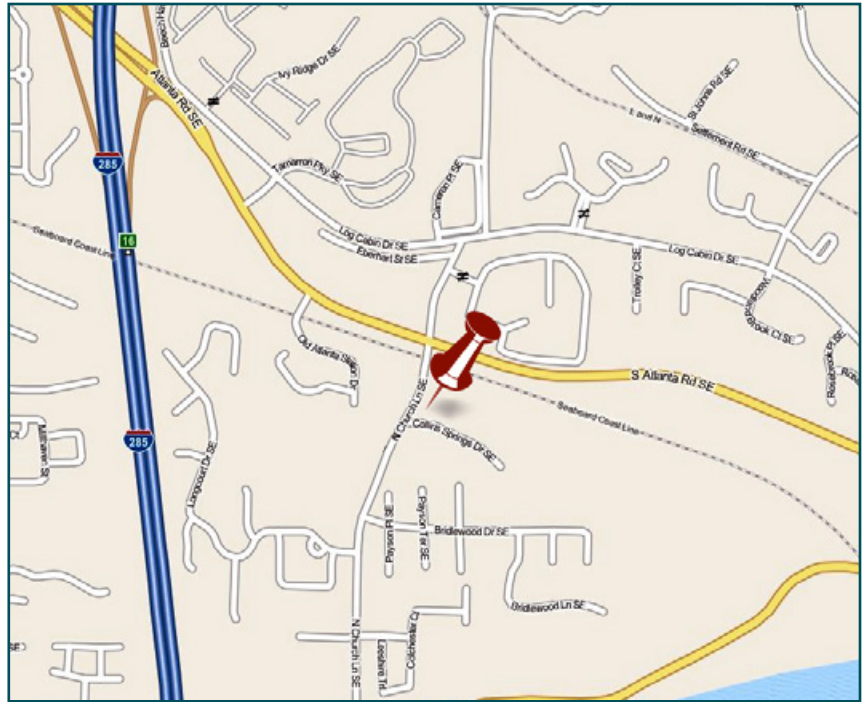


*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



**AF Hall
4775 N. Church Lane SE
Atlanta, GA 30339**

**Leonard Presberg
1/14/24 1:00 pm EST
(At Hall and on Zoom)**



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