

## Ben Radford: “Mass Hysteria - Madness, Myths, and Truths”

AFS will be proud to have a crucial leader of skepticism nation-wide (and internationally) and a highly regarded and popular speaker, **Ben Radford** to deliver a talk and lead us in discussion on Sunday, 12 February. Radford, who is well known to many AFS members but who has not favored us with a talk for some years, is among the most important American skeptical leaders. He will talk to us about “**Mass Hysteria: Madness, Myths, and Truths.**”

Radford noted, by way of introduction, “For many people the term mass hysteria (also known as mass sociogenic illness) conjures up images of widespread public panic such as what (allegedly) occurred in **Orson Welles’s** 1938 ‘War of the Worlds’ radio play. But mass hysterias are far more common than people realize, and their nature is widely misunderstood. Come discover what mass hysteria really is, and hear about bizarre historical cases.” Committee for Skeptical Inquiry Research Fellow Benjamin Radford investigated—and solved—one of the world’s most famous cases of mass hysteria, the Pokémon Panic in 1997, which was published in the *Southern Medical Journal*.

Benjamin Radford is deputy editor of *Skeptical Inquirer* science magazine and a Research Fellow with the non-profit educational organization the **Committee for Skeptical Inquiry**. He has written thousands of articles on a wide variety of topics, including urban legends, the paranormal, critical thinking, and science literacy.

He is author of thirteen books, several of which bear on his topic for Sunday, especially *The Martians Have Landed! A History of Media-Driven Panics and Hoaxes*. His other books include *Hoaxes, Myths, and Manias: Why We Need Critical Thinking* (with Bob Bartholomew); *Media Mythmakers: How Journalists, Activists, and Advertisers Mislead Us*; *Lake Monster Mysteries* (with Joe Nickell); *Scientific Paranormal Investigation: How to Solve Unexplained Mysteries*; *Tracking the Chupacabra: The Vampire Beast in Fact,*



**Ben Radford**

### Calendar

Feb 12	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Mar 12	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Apr 9	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm

All events are via Zoom unless noted and are subject to change.

*Fiction, and Folklore; Investigating Ghosts; Big—If True: Adventures in Oddity, and most recently, America the Fearful: Media and the Marketing of National Panics.*

Radford is one of the world’s few science-based paranormal investigators, and has done first-hand research into mysterious phenomena including psychics, ghosts and haunted houses; exorcisms, miracles, Bigfoot, stigmata, lake monsters, UFO sightings, reincarnation, and crop circles, and many other topics. He is perhaps best known for solving the mysteries of the Santa Fe Courthouse Ghost in 2007, and the Hispanic vampire *el chupacabra* in 2010.

Radford holds a Masters degree from Dartmouth in Public Health, a Masters from SUNY-Buffalo in Education, and a Bachelors in Psychology from the University of New Mexico. Radford has appeared on the Discovery Channel, the History Channel, the National Geographic Channel, the Learning Channel, CBC, CBS, BBC, CNN, and other networks with three letters. He also served as a consultant for the MTV series *The Big Urban Myth Show* and an episode of the CBS crime drama *CSI*. Radford has appeared in publications including the *Wall Street Journal*, *Wired*, *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Ladies’ Home Journal*.

Expect to learn much more about mass hysteria and skepticism in general. There will be time for some questions.

**AFS February Meeting  
Feb. 6, 2023 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)**

To join Zoom meeting go to this link:  
[us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911](https://us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911)



**For the latest in upcoming AFS events, join our Meetup group!**  
[meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society](https://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 unless 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.



- |         |   |
|---------|---|
| 12 Feb  | Ben Radford - Mass Hysteria                                 |
| 12 Mar  | Antonio Daza - An Atheist Runs for Congress                 |
| 9 Apr   | Keith Parsons - Between the Rabid Right and the Looney Left |
| 14 May  | Samantha McGuire of American Atheists                       |
| 11 June | Rob Boston or Rachel Laser of Americans United              |
| 9 July  | Dan Barker  |

### AFS Email List

The AFS Announcements email list provides subscribers with reminders and updates on AFS activities. Send an email to [AFS-Announce-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:AFS-Announce-subscribe@yahoogroups.com) to subscribe. The AFS Forum email list is a place for discussions of freethought, atheism, agnosticism, church-state separation and religion. To subscribe to this list, send an email to [AFSForum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:AFSForum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com). The AFS Facebook page is at [facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought](https://facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought). For calendar information on AFS activities, please join the [Meetup group](#). The AFS website is [www.atlantafreethought.org](http://www.atlantafreethought.org).

To keep up to date on the Atlanta Freethought Society calendar of upcoming events, please join our Meetup group: [meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society](https://meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society).

---

*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.

---

Views, opinions, positions or strategies expressed by authors are theirs alone and do not necessarily reflect the views, opinions, positions or strategies of the Atlanta Freethought Society or any member thereof. The editors of *Atlanta Freethought News* reserve the right to edit or alter in any manner it sees fit any articles deemed to be obscene, offensive, defamatory, threatening, in violation of trademark, copyright or other laws, or is otherwise unacceptable; and also to correct grammar and to conserve space.

## Atlanta Freethought News An AFS Publication

Editor: Laura Ross  
Assistant Editor: Steve Yothment

### How to Contact the Editor

Send correspondence to AFS at:  
4775 N. Church Lane SE,  
Atlanta, GA 30339,  
phone Laura at 404-634-1005, or send  
e-mail to [Laura@LauraRossDesign.com](mailto:Laura@LauraRossDesign.com)  
or [luara.mom@gmail.com](mailto:luara.mom@gmail.com)

### (Tentative) 2023 Board of Directors

Mark Banks – 770-354-1546  
Diane Buckner, Treasurer – 404-257-6008  
Michael Buckner – 404-633-2486  
Dwight Lyman, Secretary – 404-825-0260  
Laura Ross, President – 404-825-0258  
Judy Thompson – 404-296-2020  
Steve Yothment – 678-364-8703

### Atlanta Freethought News

Vol. 29, Number 2, February 2023 CE  
Copyright © 2023 by the Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc. Signed articles are all copyright © 2023 by their respective authors.

Membership in AFS is \$50/year per person,  
\$20 for low income.

Membership includes voting privileges and  
AFNews by email/USPS (indicate preferences).

Sustaining Membership is \$100.

Life Membership is \$1000.

Subscriptions only are \$30 for 12 issues.

Please make checks or money orders payable to  
**Atlanta Freethought Society**  
(or Paypal to [afs@atlantafreethought.org](mailto:afs@atlantafreethought.org)).

Visit our Meetup page at  
[meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society](https://meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society).

See AFS events and member views at:  
[facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought](https://facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought).

Send E-mail to  
[afs@atlantafreethought.org](mailto:afs@atlantafreethought.org).

AFS Wordpress specialist: Dwight Lyman  
AFS Facebook page: Laura Ross, Ed Buckner,  
Steve Yothment



# On Taking the “No-Risk Bet” and Believing in God

By Ed Buckner, *Letters to a Free Country*

*Shouldn't atheists admit that they have everything to gain and nothing to lose by becoming believers?*

This one is a really old (365 years or more) chestnut and yet some believers have asked me, as if it was just obviously irrefutable, why I just don't grasp that I should start believing so that I can go to heaven instead of hell. After all, if I'm wrong about believing—if there is no god—I supposedly have nothing to lose. But if I'm right, I can gain infinity—everlasting life. Where's the downside, for heaven's sake (so to speak)?

Dozens of philosophers and freethinkers have answered this and on this one I'm nearly certain there's nothing new to say. But the question keeps getting asked, so I'll set forth here a summary of the main points to answering this. Like many others in this series, the post is primarily for two groups: 1. people who honestly haven't seen any answers and 2. people who know there are good answers but want a review of them or an easy place to find them.

Though it may have been dreamt up before him, **Blaise Pascal**, whose 400th birthday will be coming up this summer, is credited, in his *Pensées* (published posthumously; he died at only 39) with first analyzing the question. The popular name for the question or idea is **Pascal's Wager** and it's easy to find material on it, sometimes including material that misrepresents what Pascal wrote and often presenting the



“wager” as if it's an obvious and nearly certain claim that cannot be rebutted. (Start [here](#) and read almost any modern atheist who has written very much. Good examples: **Dan Barker** in *Losing Faith in Faith* (1992) and in *Godless* (2008), **Richard Dawkins** in *The God Delusion* (2006), **Tom Flynn/Theodore Drange** in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (2007), **Christopher Hitchens** in *god is not Great* (2007), **Herb Silverman** in *Candidate without a Prayer* (2012), **George H. Smith** in *Atheism: The Case Against God* (1979), **Gordon Stein** in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism* (1980), and many others. Silverman, like Pascal a mathematician, even offers and justifies, a little light-heartedly, an opposite wager.

Pascal did claim that there's a nearly infinite advantage to believing and almost no risk to not believing, but he did not frame this as an argument for belief, as he wrote that no evidence could be produced for or against the existence of a god. He didn't really argue, as many have since, that atheists should simply switch to believers when presented with this “wager.” He claimed instead that atheists should be as open as possible to evidence and arguments, should try to assume the truth of theism, to sort of “try it on.”

But why not?

1. Belief really isn't just a simple matter of choosing to believe. You have to be convinced or persuaded, then your mind adopts the belief. Can you, however bizarre you think someone's weird idea is, just say, “OK, say no

more—I'll believe that moonlight is toxic”? Won't it take some evidence or someone you trust as an authority telling you it's true before you can believe?

2. Believing in a god presumably has to be sincere to work. Just saying or writing, “I believe in God!” without really meaning it probably won't fool even your parent or your friend—and surely not an allegedly all-knowing, all-seeing deity.
3. Since no one has ever known what it would be like to live forever, how can anyone be sure that's even a good thing? Especially if it seems to come with none of the pleasures associated much that we do treasure in life—anticipation, appreciation of something not previously experienced, and the like. And presumably with days stretching out forever singing the praises of an all-powerful being. Could it quickly turn into endless boredom?
4. The claim that you have nothing to lose doesn't hold up. You stand to lose in your earthly life:
  - a. Self respect.
  - b. Reduction of irrational guilt.
  - c. Patience and tolerance for others and their beliefs.
  - d. Time spent in worship or adoration or—this is perhaps the biggie—time cowering in fear.
  - e. Money that could be used on other things.
  - f. Power to control your own life and affairs as independently, responsibly, and wisely as possible.
5. The claim that you have everything—or anything, in fact—to gain is also suspect at best. Do you gain—
  - a. Everlasting life? What does that really even mean? Since we cannot know the unknowable, how can we know that blindly believing in a god is what the God wants? (Silverman's Wager applies, so ask Herb.) Why do we think that's what the payoff will be and not just some imaginary extra money under our pillows when we pull a loose belief? There are hundreds, probably thousands, of beings that one group or another of humans consider to be a god—how can anyone know which is the right one to believe in to win the eternal life jackpot? Wishing has no direct bearing on success—and even though I keep fantasizing about winning that billion-dollar lottery, it keeps not coming my way.

**Pascal continued on Page 5**

## In the Future, Let's Skip this Breakfast

by Rob Boston • AU.org • Wall of Separation

The National Prayer Breakfast (NPB) took place on February 2. Despite its name, the breakfast is not a government-sponsored event – although top political leaders, including presidents, members of Congress and others attend.

Americans United has **made it clear over the years** that the NPB is an empty exercise in “civil religion.” During the Trump presidency, the event was often nothing **short of an embarrassment**. Trump used it to criticize his political foes, unveil harmful policy proposals and generally behave in an immature manner.

President Joe Biden does none of that – his remarks on that day were a call for unity that will probably be ignored in a deeply divided Washington – but it's still clear that there's nothing about this event that's worth salvaging. Its origins go back only to the 1950s when a shadowy Christian Nationalist group called the International Foundation (AKA “The Family”) began putting on the event.

### Is The Family Really Stepping Back?

This year, there has been a bit of media buzz after The Young Turks website **reported** that The Family will no longer sponsor the event. Instead, a scaled-back event will be coordinated by a new group called the National Prayer Breakfast Foundation.

But is this really a change? Literary journalist **Jeff Sharlet**, a leading expert

on The Family and author of the 2008 book *The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power* (which became the basis for a popular **Netflix series**), **told Religion News Service**

that he is skeptical that things have really changed, noting that the board of the new organization includes many people with ties to the International Foundation.

“Any step toward reducing this mostly off-the-books week long lobbying festival is good news,” Sharlet, a member of Americans United's Board of Trustees, said. “On the other hand, the change appears largely cosmetic.”



### The Prayer Breakfast's Un-Democratic Message

In **an interview** with **Jonathan Larsen** of The Young Turks, I criticized the National Prayer Breakfast for its “un-democratic message that to be a good American, you must also be Christian. Everything the event represents is contrary to our country's founding promise of the separation of church and state.”

This event has outlived its usefulness – if it ever had any to begin with. It's time to call it a day.

## Become a Member!

(Or renew your membership with this form or online at [www.AtlantaFreethought.org](http://www.AtlantaFreethought.org)!)

**Individual memberships:** One person can become a member for \$50 per year.

**Sustaining memberships:** One person can become a sustaining member for \$100 per year.

**Life memberships:** Avoid the hassle of renewing every year. A \$1000 life membership lasts a lifetime.

**Paper newsletter:** We encourage members to receive the newsletter by email. This avoids the printing and mailing expenses. But if you really want the paper version of the newsletter, just let us know and we will send it to you at no additional charge. (You can also pick up a paper newsletter at any AFS meeting.)

Thank you for your support! We look forward to your being with us in the coming months!

### Membership Dues # of mems Total

Individual	\$50	_____	\$_____
Low Income	\$20	_____	\$_____
Sustaining Member	\$100	_____	\$_____
Life Member	\$1000	_____	\$_____
Subscription only	\$30	_____	\$_____
Extra donation (Thank you!)			\$_____
		Total:	\$_____

Receive PDF of newsletter by email

Receive paper newsletter by post

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address: \_\_\_\_\_  
Phone: H \_\_\_\_\_ W \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: \_\_\_\_\_

Save time, postage, and keep your hands clean  
by making a payment via **Paypal** to:

[afs@atlantafreethought.org](mailto:afs@atlantafreethought.org)

## Contraception, Religious Exemptions and the Wolf in Sheep's Clothing

by Katherine Yordy • AU.org • Wall of Separation

Fifty years after the *Roe v. Wade* decision was handed down, the legal landscape of health care and bodily autonomy is on fire. Not only has the constitutional right to abortion access been revoked, but threats to other dimensions of reproductive health care, such as access to contraceptives, abound.

Recently, a lawsuit was filed in Texas by a former employee of a CVS drug store who was fired for refusing to prescribe contraception. The plaintiff, a nurse practitioner, claimed her termination was wrongful because she sought a religious exemption to avoid prescribing these medications. The lawsuit is new, but it has the potential to cause great damage to the separation of church and state in health care. It is only the latest of a long line of cases of providers refusing to provide reproductive health care, including **emergency contraception** and **medication abortion**. It's also part of the larger Christian Nationalist agenda that seeks to use our court system to dismantle civil liberties and warp religious freedom into the religious privilege of a few.

It came as no surprise that First Liberty Institute is representing the plaintiff in this case. This is the same organization that successfully argued before the Supreme Court that a high school football coach praying on the 50-yard line is "private" prayer and that has backed the idea that publicly funded school vouchers can be used for private religious institutions. First Liberty Institute proudly claims it defends religious freedom, but the group leaves out the part where it fights to impose a Christian Nationalist agenda on the public. First Liberty leaves out the part where it undermines our First Amendment right to a separation of church and state.

### A Twisted Definition Of 'Religious Freedom'

While the nurse's case has a long way to go before it reaches the Supreme Court, if it ever does, it's another example of the attempt to chip away at our rights under the guise of so-called "religious freedom."

As someone who has relied on contraceptives for health care purposes aside from just preventing pregnancy, the idea that this important form of health care could become harder for some women to get because of a stranger's religion terrifies me.

Religious exemptions have a special place in my heart; I have family members who relied on religious exemptions to military service as conscientious objectors. But there's a key difference

between that scenario and the nurse's case: by refusing to prescribe contraception, she is imposing her religious views on others. This is not the first and won't be the last time a "religious exemption" is used this way.

### Do No Harm!

To ensure we are protected from religious freedom wielded as a weapon instead of as a shield, we must demand that our policy makers pass the **Do No Harm Act**. This bill, currently pending in Congress, will help protect everyone's religious freedom while ensuring that no one can misuse it to harm others.

Religious freedom is a cherished right. But it has limits. Your religious belief does not give you the right to discriminate against me or impose your views on me.



### Pascal continued from Page 3

Does anyone really think that if I just really, really believed, like Dumbo and his feather or the audience and the Tinkerbell effect, that would make time roll on and on and on? Or that hundreds of millions of dollars would be more likely to fall into my pocket? Maybe I don't even have to buy a lottery ticket to win the lottery?

- b. The supportive group and community that comes from joining together with fellow believers? The fellowship and commiseration and sharing of joys and concerns that can accompany church or temple or mosque membership are real and mostly positive things—but those come from human beings, not from supernatural beings. If a group of people all believe in the importance of nature and halting global climate disruption and got together to discuss these things frequently, couldn't that have the same benefits? The Unitarians proved, long ago, that you can have fellowship and community without requiring any belief in any gods.

To sum up—wagering may or may not be wise in general, but betting the only life you have on a doubtful proposition just because the odds seem to be intimidating or there appears to be a prohibitive favorite, doesn't really make sense. Instead, ask for reasons, evidence, and logic, and think carefully, and read widely—as with any proposition that matters.

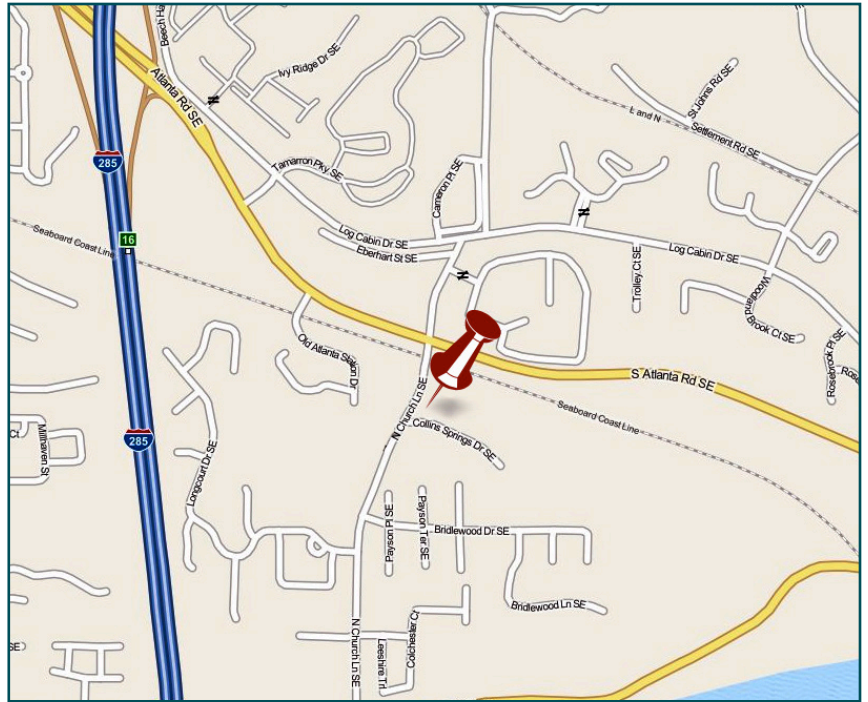


*Dare To Think  
For Yourself!*



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

**Ben Radford  
2/12/23 1:00 pm EST  
(via Zoom)**



Atlanta Freethought News is produced by the Atlanta Freethought Society, Inc., a 501(c)(3) non-profit, member-run, educational organization created to advance freethought and protect freethinkers. Any freethought, atheist, secular humanist, agnostic, or rationalist group is granted permission to reproduce anything from our newsletter not expressly labeled otherwise (acknowledgement of AFS and author appreciated). Articles published represent the official opinion of AFS only when that is clearly stated; all other opinion is that of the individual author.

Atlanta Freethought News  
Atlanta Freethought Society  
4775 N Church Lane SE  
Atlanta GA 30339

