

## Paul Salahuddin Armstrong - "The US and US Politics, A British Muslim Perspective" (via Zoom)

A discussion of United States and US politics, present and historic, from the perspective of a British Muslim who appreciates the United States and has a deep faith rooted in Islam. How can this be, you may ask? What could a British convert to Islam possibly appreciate about the United



**Paul Salahuddin Armstrong**

States—What about the ‘clash of civilisations’?! Perhaps this isn’t so much a clash, more a coming together... Join us on April 11, and you decide.

Paul Salahuddin Armstrong is an alumnus of the **International Visitor Leadership Program (IVLP)** and an Associate of **St**

**George’s House**. He has worked in a number of fields over the years, including in the media, diplomacy, Muslim marriage (*nikah*) services, interfaith, human rights, policy, countering extremism, outreach, third-sector and other community-related activities. He currently runs the **Association of British Muslims** with **Mohammed Abbasi** and a dedicated team from all walks of life, reflecting the diversity of British Muslims, and is a **Muslim Chaplain** at the **University of Birmingham**.

For more information, please visit: [paulsarmstrong.com/biography/](http://paulsarmstrong.com/biography/)

Please click on the link below to participate in the meeting. Socializing starts at 12:30 pm.

**AFS April Meeting**  
**April 11, 2021 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)

### Calendar

Apr 11	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
May 9	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
June 13	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm

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

### FFRF cheers plummeting U.S. church membership

The **Freedom From Religion Foundation** is cheering a **report** from Gallup that formal church membership among Americans has dropped below 50 percent for the first time in Gallup’s 80-year history of asking the question.

“Americans are waking up,” says FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker**, a former evangelical preacher and author of several books on “losing faith in faith” and leaving religion behind.

Gallup noted that this is likely not an anomaly caused by the pandemic and quarantine, but part of a long-term trend. “U.S. church membership was 73 percent when Gallup first measured it in 1937 and remained near 70 percent for the next six decades, before beginning a steady decline around the turn of the 21st century.”

The “decline in church membership is primarily a function of the increasing number of Americans who express no religious preference,” explains Gallup. In 1999, 70 percent of Americans belonged to a church, so the drop to 47 percent in 2020 is a massive loss of one-third.

Perhaps the most important finding was that church membership declined in every single demographic Gallup measured: age, gender, marital status, education level, geographical region and race. For instance, the number of non-Hispanic white adults who belong to a church dropped 16 points (from 68 to 52) in the last two decades, while non-Hispanic Black adults dropped 19 points (from 78-59) over that time.

**Go to Church Membership page 3**

**For the latest in upcoming AFS events, join our Meetup group!**  
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## 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 due to global pandemic (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.

**May 9: Jim Underdown**

**June 13: Kathleen Johnson**

**July 11: TBD**

**August 8: Kenneth Copp**

### 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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### Atlanta Freethought News

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## Biden Administration Rejects Trump/Pompeo Emphasis On ‘Unalienable Rights’

Wall of Separation Blog - Rob Boston

The administration of President **Joe Biden** continues to roll back misguided policies of the **Trump** era. Not all these actions are grabbing headlines, but they're important and shouldn't be overlooked.

Here's an example: The U.S. State Department, we learned at the end of March, is **putting an end** to a Trump policy that emphasized far-right theological views in international relations.

Under former Secretary of State **Mike Pompeo**, the department was guided by a **Commission on Unalienable Rights**. The name may sound harmless, even positive, but don't be fooled. This entity, yet another sop to Trump's Christian nationalist allies, elevated extreme definitions of religious freedom and property rights over other types of human rights and downplayed persecution against LGBTQ people abroad.

The change had been heavily criticized by human rights advocates, and now the commission is no more. Secretary of State **Antony Blinken** announced on March 30 that the Pompeo/Trump approach was formally being scrapped.

"One of the core principles of human rights is that they are universal," Blinken said. "All people are entitled to these rights, no matter where they're born, what they believe, whom they love, or any other characteristic. Human rights are also co-equal; there is no hierarchy that makes some rights more important than others."



Blinken added, "Past unbalanced statements that suggest such a hierarchy, including those offered by a recently disbanded State Department advisory committee, do not represent a guiding document for this administration. At my confirmation hearing, I promised that the **Biden-Harris** Administration would repudiate those unbalanced views. We do so decisively today."

Critics accused the Trump administration

of downplaying women's rights, reproductive freedom and LGBTQ rights in its approach to international relations. For example, the Trump administration removed sections detailing attacks on women's reproductive rights

### Church Membership continued

FFRF notes two caveats that make the findings even more exciting. First, this is self-reported church membership. Demographers and sociologists have long known that survey respondents overreport their church attendance. **Actual church attendance** is about one-quarter to one-half what is self-reported.

The Gallup datapoint is slightly different, seeking to determine formal membership with specific houses of worship, but is still likely overreported for similar reasons.

Second, America appears to be returning to its irreligious roots. At the time of our nation's founding, most Americans — the vast majority — were unchurched. This fact cuts against the popular and misguided Christian nationalist narrative that our Christian nation was founded for and by Christians. **According to U.S. historians and religion scholars, Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore**, "The highest estimates for the late eighteenth century make only about 10-15 percent of the population church members."

FFRF has long sought to educate the public about freethought (using reason to judge religious claims) and to provide a community and soft landing for people leaving religion. "It's working," notes FFRF Co-President **Annie Laurie Gaylor**.

abroad in its annual human rights report. The commission, which was stacked with conservatives, was chaired by **Mary Ann Glendon**, former U.S. ambassador to the Vatican and a high-profile opponent of legal abortion and LGBTQ rights. (The LGBTQ-rights organization **GLAAD issued a report** noting that seven of the commission's 10 members had made anti-LGBTQ statements in the past.)

Christian nationalists heralded the Pompeo/Trump approach because it supposedly emphasized the fact that rights are "God given." The administration also tied its approach to extreme forms of "America first" nationalism.

Pompeo clearly saw the creation of the commission as part of his legacy. He said he hoped that his approach to human rights around the globe would guide future administrations. That's not going to happen. NBC News reported that nearly "all references to the commission's report and Pompeo's advocacy of it have been removed from the State Department's website"; they remain only as archived pages.

That is precisely where this misguided approach to human rights belongs.



# Michigan Catholic School Has No Right To Be Exempt From Mask Mandate, AU Tells Court

Wall of Separation Blog - Rob Boston

There's good news in America's fight against the coronavirus pandemic. Growing numbers of Americans have been vaccinated, many schools are again offering in-person classes and some states are starting to loosen restrictions on gatherings.

But health experts say we're not in the clear yet, and that's why it's important that Americans continue to follow some commonsense regulations, including wearing masks in spaces where lots of people gather.

Unfortunately, some religious groups are resisting mask mandates. In Michigan, for example, officials at Resurrection School, a Catholic institution in Lansing, don't want to comply with a general order from state health officials that all people in the state who are at least 5 years old wear face masks whenever they are in a shared space with someone outside their household. This order applies equally to all schools in the state; it's binding on public schools and private schools, be they religious or secular.

The school's leaders **have argued in court**, "In accordance with the teachings of the Catholic faith, Resurrection School believes that every human has dignity and is made in God's image and likeness. Unfortunately, a mask shields our humanity. And because God created us in His image, we are masking that image."

In a friend-of-the-court brief **filed** last week before the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Americans United and 13 religious and civil-rights organizations don't dispute the sincerity of this religious claim but point out that in these extraordinary times, government may take steps to protect the health and safety of everyone, as long as its regulations are neutral and treat religious and secular entities alike, as Michigan's rules do.

The brief traces the history of religious freedom in America, pointing out that the provision in the First Amendment that ensures the "free exercise"

of religion "was never intended or originally understood to require religious exemptions from laws that protect public health or safety. Rather, the Clause was enacted to address a long history of governmental efforts to suppress particular religious groups based on disapproval of the groups or their beliefs."

Concludes the brief, "The precious right of religious freedom should not be misused in a manner that jeopardizes the health of children and their family members."

Indeed, it should not. We're making real progress in tamping down the spread of the virus. This is exactly the wrong time to allow misguided interpretations of religious freedom to set us back.

P.S. Americans United's Legal Department has filed 48 friend-of-the-court briefs in coronavirus-related cases across the country, urging courts not to grant demands for religious exemptions from public health orders. AU's Public Policy Department has weighed in with letters to governors, legislators and other government officials, and we've made the case against special exemptions for religious groups in the media and other public forums. You can read about **our work here**.

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

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# What America's Changing Religious Demographics Mean For Church-State Separation

Wall of Separation Blog - Rob Boston

A **new poll** from Gallup shows that fewer than 50% of Americans say they belong to a house of worship.

Gallup has been asking this question since 1937, and the figure has never been this low. In the mid-1990s, the number was 70%. It dropped to 50% in 2019 and now stands at 47%.

What's going on? Sociologists and professors of religious studies are grappling with that question, but what we're seeing may be nothing more than the logical culmination of the broad spirit of religious freedom embraced by the founders.

Despite what Christian nationalists may say, religious freedom in America was never intended to be defined as, "You can be anything you want – as long as you're Christian." The "Christian nation" myth has no historical foundation and **is debunked** by many things, including the text of our own Constitution.

America's version of religious freedom has always encompassed the right to doubt, to debate, to argue, to change your mind, to blend traditions and to create your own personal theology outside the walls of any house of worship – or to reject religion entirely. Today, growing numbers of Americans are taking that spirit and running with it.

Our founders would approve. Reflecting on his pioneering religious liberty statute in Virginia, **Thomas Jefferson wrote** that the measure was designed to protect "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel of every denomination."

Jefferson himself indulged liberally in this freedom. He questioned the claims of Christianity, **edited the New Testament** to remove the portions he did not accept and considered Jesus to be

a moral teacher, not a divine figure. Asked to describe his religious beliefs, **Jefferson replied**, "I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know." (Long before Jefferson, **Roger Williams**, founder of Rhode Island and an early religious freedom advocate, explored different spiritual paths. Williams was raised in the Church of England, became a Puritan minister, then briefly embraced the Baptist faith before ending up as a spiritual seeker, not fitting into any box.)

Growing numbers of Americans are traveling the path that Williams, Jefferson and others blazed. They aren't necessarily jettisoning belief in God; they're just less interested in organized religion.



Photo by Jeffery Erhurse on Unsplash

The decline of organized religion will affect church-state issues. For starters, fewer souls in the pews means fewer dollars in the collection plate. Some religious leaders might be tempted to turn to public support for their schools and other institutions to make up the difference. That would be a mistake. It's not the government's job to bail out religious entities if the people no longer wish to support them.

Secondly, we could see an important shift in how social services are provided in America. Some scholars have **bemoaned the decline** of institutional religion, noting that houses of worship sponsor things like food banks, homeless shelters, substance abuse counseling and so on.

That's true, but outsourcing social services to faith-based groups is something our political leaders have chosen; there are other options. Countries in Western Europe, Scandinavia and other parts of the world that have become more secular have found ways to help people in need without funneling services through religious groups.

If they do it, we can, too. If we're smart, we'll start now.

Christian nationalists are already bemoaning recent trends. A commentator for the American Family Association **has opined**, "We will be a secular police state, like so much of Europe is, like so much of the world is becoming."

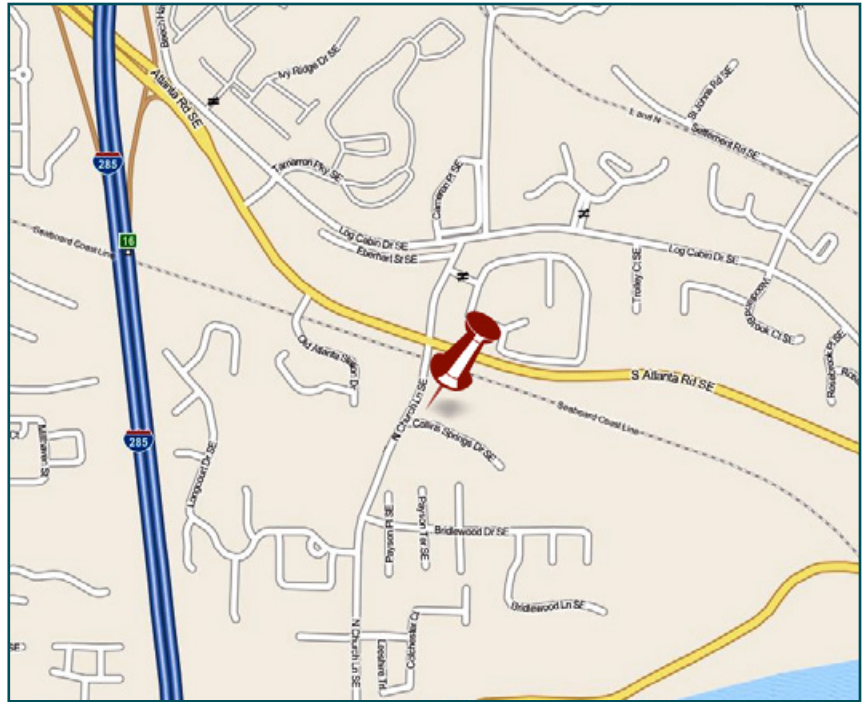
These alarmists need to remember that how, when or if people worship has never been any of the government's business. Increasingly, growing numbers of Americans are, by their actions, making that clear.

*Dare To Think  
For Yourself!*



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**Paul Armstrong  
4/11/21 1:00 pm EST  
(via Zoom)**



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