

Dr. Keith Parsons: “Between the Looney Left and the Rabid Right, can Universities Survive?”

AFS has the great good fortune to have the return of a favorite speaker, Dr. Keith Parsons. Keith, who is now at the University of Houston Clear Lake (and semi-retired) once lived in Atlanta and has spoken to AFS several times before. He is always interesting, thought-provoking, and lucid, even when explaining views not everyone agrees with. The talk and discussion on Sunday, 9 April that Parsons will lead is on the topic he is writing about this week on the **Letters to a Free Country** blog on Substack, “Between the Looney Left and the Rabid Right, Can Universities Survive?”



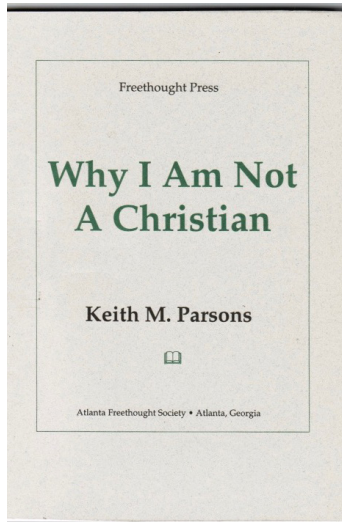
Keith Parsons

Parsons noted, by way of introduction, “Confronted with overheated rhetoric and wild assertions from ideologues of the left and right, how do you maintain rationality and equanimity? How do you chart a course between the looney left and the rabid right? How do you keep your head when everyone about you is losing theirs and blaming you

(as Kipling put it)? My talk concerns the dilemmas faced by rational people in these crazy times.”

Keith Parsons is a professor of philosophy and has published in the fields of philosophy of science, history of science, philosophy of religion, and logic and critical thinking.

His publications include *God and the Burden of Proof*, (Prometheus Books, 1989), *Drawing out Leviathan*, (Indiana University Press, 2001), *The Great Dinosaur Controversy*, (ABC-Clio Press, 2003), and *It Started with Copernicus*



Calendar

- Apr 9 General Meeting Live/Online 1 pm
- May 14 General Meeting Live/Online 1 pm
- May 14 Special Meeting Live/Online 4:30 pm

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

(Prometheus Books, 2014). Dr. Parsons’ most recent publication, *Bombing the Marshall Islands*, an exploration of the effect of nuclear tests in the Marshall Islands from 1946 to 1958, was published in 2017 by Cambridge University Press. He is also the author of AFS’s own (Freethought Press) publication *Why I Am Not a Christian* (2000).

He has a doctorate in philosophy from Queen’s University, Canada, and a doctorate in history and philosophy of science from the University of Pittsburgh. Dr. Parsons has won awards both for teaching and for research and has been an invited speaker, presenter, or debater at a number of national and international conferences and colloquia.

We’re always pleased to provide great programs like this one for our members and visitors, and we expect to continue doing that throughout 2023 and beyond.

AFS April Meeting Apr. 9, 2023 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

To join Zoom meeting go to this link:
us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911

Mubarak Bala, Allegations of Blasphemy, and Humanism in Nigeria

Dr. Leo Igwe
May 14th, 2023

4:30 pm EST

Location: Atlanta Freethought Hall, and Zoom
4775 N. Church Lane SE, Atlanta, GA 30339

Suggested donation: \$10
(visit blacknonbelievers.org to do so online)

Presented by: Atlanta Freethought Society,
Black Nonbelievers, and Ethical Humanists of Atlanta



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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 (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.



- 9 Apr Keith Parsons - *Between the Rabid Right and the Looney Left*
14 May Samantha McGuire of American Atheists
14 May Dr. Leo Igwe (at 4:30 - see ad on page 1)
11 June Rob Boston or Rachel Laser of Americans United
9 July Dan Barker

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

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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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On the Right to Have Rights If There Is No God There to Grant Any

By Ed Buckner • Letters to a Free Country • edbuckner.substack.com

A quite frequent freethought perennial is related to the source of rights. Many a theist (and especially many a Christian nationalist) seems to think that this issue is the ultimate clincher supporting claiming a Christian basis for the US as an approach to governing, whatever the US Constitution says or doesn't.

If there is a god who is all powerful and cares about humanity, then of course it is logical to think that god granted us whatever rights we may have. But if there is no god who is all powerful and cares about humanity, then of course it is quite illogical to think that god granted us whatever rights we may have. But there is plenty to say on the subject even without resolving the question of whether any supernatural force exists at all.

I have been in several formal debates on these matters, but probably the ones most directly on this topic have been with my friend **Jay Lucas**, pastor of Grace Community Church in Washington Court House, Ohio. Most of the text in this post is adapted from those debates with him. (Jay has posted one essay here on *Letters*... and will, I hope, post here again.)

Less reasonable and trustworthy Christian commenters—men like **Philip Witig** (*Apostasy Can Lead a Nation to Self-Destruct: Will America Mend Its Ways and Return to God?* [2019]) and **Richard G. Lee** (*In God We Still Trust* [2009])—provide irrelevant and misleading facts about things like how many members of the Constitutional Convention were Christians of one denomination or another. Some of the “Founding Fathers” were deists, but most were at least nominally Christians. They were, in a general cultural way, influenced by Christian ideas and by British ideas and by Enlightenment ideas, etc. What matters, though, is the values and principles they incorporated into the governing document they created—and honest discussion of this subject requires addressing those, not in presenting poorly related “facts.”

So, if human rights don't come from god and they don't come from government (if they did, government would also have the power to remove them), where do they come from? Hint:



The very idea of human rights has developed over many thousands of years, and the details and meaning of those rights are still developing thanks to “We the People”—to human culture in general and to the citizens of the US more specifically—not being handed down fully formed from on high or by government edict.

It's clear to me that a society and a government not based on any religion—that is, an a-theistic one—is as much in the best interests of believers as it is in mine. All citizens of this nation agree—or should—that human rights are quite important and we agree that human rights are not bestowed upon us by government—that seeing government as the source of rights endangers those rights. My case against this being a Christian government, a case that is irrefutable given the known facts, logic, and history, is simple, and I invite others to try to break down even one major part of it. Here are seven key points:

1. **Calling** a society “atheistic” or “Christian” is assuredly not enough to protect human rights. Neither Christianity nor atheism is a sufficient basis for protecting human rights, however such rights are defined. **Pol Pot** and **Joseph Stalin** led societies that were atheistic but that slaughtered human beings, never mind affording them even less basic rights. Likewise with inquisitions led by Christian popes, governments like that led by the great Protestant **John Calvin** in Geneva, as well as Nazi Germany (led by **Hitler**, a man who proclaimed himself as doing Christ's work). And there have been hundreds of other examples of leaders or societies who asserted that the horrific rule they carried out was done in the name of one god or another, one religion or another—with many concepts of “god,” many of these “Christian.” To repeat, point #1 is that calling a society “atheistic” or “Christian” is assuredly not enough to protect human rights.
2. The official charter of Christianity, the Bible, is not amendable, is not subject to change for the better, though that change has been plainly needed. The Bible is demonstrably inadequate for protecting human rights that virtually all modern Americans—including Christian Americans—take for granted as obviously wise and just rights.
3. Despite the official invariability of the Bible, Christians have changed their ideas, substantially and importantly, as to what properly constitute human rights, their standards for what human rights ought to be. Christians have not, in other words, just varied in terms of how well they adhere to standards for human rights—they've changed standards. How many of you reading this, for example, think that it is now or ever has been acceptable to “buy slaves” from nations other than your own? (See Leviticus 25: 44.) Or that slaves should quietly serve and obey their Christian masters, as Paul declared in 1st Timothy 6:2? Changes from such ideas have been accepted by almost all modern Christians, including almost all leaders and theologians (dominionist theocrats are exceptions), and likely all Christian readers of *Letters* ...
4. Despite significant flaws in protecting human rights throughout American history, the overall picture suggests that human rights are better protected in the US now than in any other time or any other nation. (If you disagree, please name a better nation or time.)
5. The governing charter in and for the US, in effect since 1789, is the US Constitution. That Constitution has been amended 27 times, with most of those amendments affecting human rights. Many of those changes have had dramatic and historically important effects, especially in the US but also world-wide. The Constitution can be amended again, though only under complex and difficult-to-accomplish terms. This built-in-from-the-beginning

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Dangerous School Prayer Bills Are Surfacing In State Legislatures

by Nik Nartowicz • AU.org • Wall of Separation

In just the past few weeks, two public school prayer bills have passed in state legislatures. Kentucky Gov. **Andy Beshear** (D) signed HB 547 into law on March 24, and the Idaho legislature sent HB 182 to Gov. **Brad Little** (R) last week. Students have the right to pray, so long as it is voluntary, non-disruptive, student-led, and student-initiated. But these bills go much further: they invite teachers to pray with students, which is unconstitutional and violates the religious freedom of public school students.

The sponsors of these bills claimed that they are just meant to reflect what the U.S. Supreme Court said in *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District*. But that explanation doesn't make a lot of sense, because you don't need legislation to do that – the Supreme Court's decision is already the law. And the reality is these bills don't mirror that decision; instead, they invite unconstitutional prayer, putting school districts in the impossible position of choosing between following the statute or the U.S. Constitution.

In *Kennedy*, the high court held that the Bremerton, Wash., School District had to allow a coach to say a private, personal prayer after football games. But the court was clear that public school employees cannot coerce students to pray with them. The court held that the coach's prayer was not coercive because it was private and personal, was offered while his students were doing something else and did not involve leading prayers with his students.

The text of these bills, however, says that public school employees can pray and engage in religious expression *at any time* they can have personal conversations. Taken at face value, this means that if a principal who is greeting

students at the door is permitted to send text messages to family members at that time, she is also allowed to pray over students as they enter the school. State Rep. **Barbara Erhardt** (R-Idaho Falls), the sponsor of the Idaho bill, even said during a committee hearing that her bill would permit teachers to pray aloud in the hallway. But that would clearly violate the Constitution.

The bill sponsors have also claimed that the bills are designed to protect religious freedom rights, but school employees already have the right to say personal, private prayers outside of instructional time. If public school employees are allowed to pray in front of or with students, students will feel coerced to join because school employees have extraordinary control over students and their experiences. Students understand that refusing to pray with a teacher or coach could negatively affect their time at school *and* their future: Teachers assign grades, give detention, and write recommendations. Coaches decide who gets to play and can help – or hinder – efforts to get college scholarships.

Unfortunately, public school prayer bills are still pending in other states, including a bill in Texas that would allow public schools to establish a period of prayer and Bible reading for teachers and students.



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amendability is one of its great strengths, including as a bulwark against injuring or destroying human rights and, especially, as a necessary tool for developing and improving human rights.

6. The US Constitution is a-theistic—free of any religious tests, religious authority, and not in any sense based on the Christian—or any other—religion. It has been that way from its start and by design of the men who wrote it, not by accident. Evidence for this, despite frequent contrary declarations, is overwhelming.

7. Human rights are better protected under an a-theistic system, provided that system allows changes—but not changes dictated by any leader nor granted or taken away by anyone but “We the People,” and not changes that can be made easily or frivolously.

Now, even those who accept what I’m saying about the US Constitution being the document that describes our rights and how they are protected—but not as the source of those rights—sometimes claim that it was a supernatural force—often, the Christian “God”—who created or at least inspired that Constitution. There are quite good grounds for rejecting that specific claim:

- The document itself—the Constitution is the first significant governing charter in human history that does not invoke the authority of any god and that nowhere in it has a single declaration of what constitutes religious truth.
- No exclusively Christian principles—not a single one—can be found in the Constitution. There are many truly revolutionary, original, vitally important ideas in the Constitution—none of them derive from the Bible or Christianity, despite various claims by Christian nationalists that some do.
- The Treaty w/ Tripoli (1796-97)—for this one, there is much more detail in an [earlier Friday Freethought Perennial](#)—

 Letters to a Free Country

Tripoli? Again, Ed, with the Tripoli Treaty?

About the Friday Freethought Perennials in general: This subset of my blog is to answer questions, nearly always already answered by me and by many others but posed again and again—over many years and in many places—on freethought, atheism, secular humanism, secularism/church-state/“This is a Christian Nation,” and similar topics. These answers are most...

[Read more](#)

2 months ago · 1 like · 2 comments · Ed Buckner

Article II of that treaty includes these words, “As the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion... .” And it was ratified unanimously in the US Senate.

Conclusion

Is the US the best place on earth, now and potentially, for human rights, as most US citizens think? This is not a Christian nation; it is, by design of its framers, an a-theistic (secular) nation and has been since 1789. History, logic, and the facts are all on my side—and not even a well-prepared great guy and effective debater like Jay Lucas could overcome that. Remember:

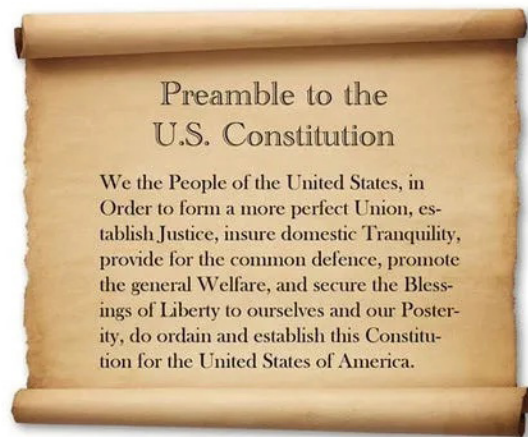
1. Under the a-theistic U.S. Constitution, rights come from and are protected by “We the People.” Those rights are not based on Christianity or any other religion, are not “given” to Americans by any government, are not defined according to any religious book or document, and neither need nor

have any protection from any sacred book or any religious leader. The people are not constricted in their ability to expand or reduce human rights except by the values accepted by the people—though they cannot change rights easily.

2. Human rights are plainly not protected in the Bible—the right to avoid being anyone’s slave, the right of a woman to professional and political power, even the right to sell and drink alcoholic beverages—are protected under the U.S. Constitution as amended.

3. Human rights change—this is probably usually if not always a good thing—but Christianity makes no allowance for that. The Bible is nowhere considered subject to amendment. The a-theistic U.S. Constitution IS amendable and rights have been created and protected by this process.

4. Freedom of religion, now widely considered a basic human right, is the first right cited in the First Amendment and, despite explicit prohibition by Christianity and Judaism, is perhaps the most quintessentially American invention of all human rights. The alternative to having a secular, a-theistic government is to have a government that we empower to make religious decisions for citizens. Whether the government is headed by a king or by democratically elected leaders, we should all prefer liberty of conscience. Ours is a free country (for atheists and Christians and everyone else).



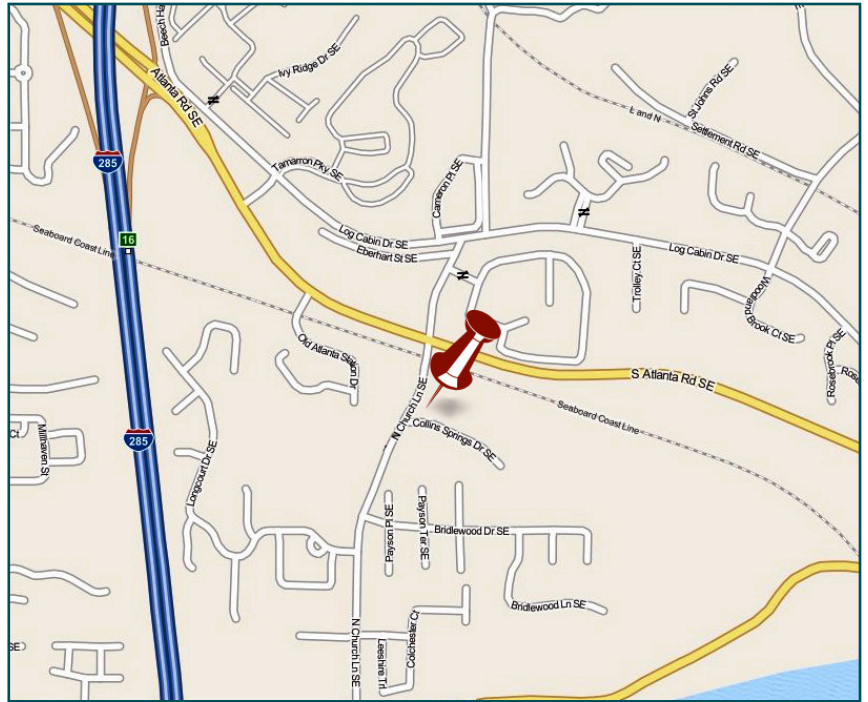
Just heard sad news from Dale Heatherington’s wife Ann, who asked us to remove him from the mailing list. He apparently passed away on June 5, 2021. Dale was a longtime sustaining member of Atlanta Freethought Society as well as the Atlanta Hobby Robot Club, was with Dennis Hayes a founder of Hayes microcomputer products in 1977, was the first communication/modem developer, and will be missed.

*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



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

**Keith Parsons
4/9/23 1:00 pm EST
(via Zoom)**



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