

James Underdown - "What Modern Paranormal Investigations Tell Us About Religious Beliefs" (via Zoom)

In recent decades, science-based investigators have looked into and tested paranormal claims that in many ways resemble biblical miracles and other supernatural religious claims. What can we infer from today's investigations in relation to ancient claims?



James Underdown

James Underdown has been the executive director of the Center for Inquiry West in Los Angeles since 1999. He is the founder and chair of the Center for Inquiry Investigations Group, which offers \$250,000 to anyone who can prove paranormal ability

under scientific testing conditions.

Underdown has represented skeptics and secularists in many media outlets including Penn and Teller's Bullshit, Dr. Phil, and Hannity and Colmes to name but a few. He has written for Skeptical Inquirer and Free Inquiry magazines, and writes the Ask the Atheist blog for CFI. He is co-host of the Point of Inquiry podcast.

If you have any interest in science, atheism, secularism, and/or the skeptical movement, you won't want to miss this meeting! Be sure to tell all your friends. Please click on the link below to participate. Socializing starts at 12:30 pm.

AFS May Meeting

May 9, 2021 1:00-2:30 PM (EDT)

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

Calendar

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

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

In Memoriam Bob Truett

We received the sad news that our longtime friend, AFS member, and beloved speaker Bob Truett passed away on April 29, 2021. He was just shy of his 89th birthday and will be greatly missed.

Felix Bob Truett (born 1932 in Jacksonville, Texas) was director of the Birmingham Zoo from September 1, 1960 to November 3, 1990.



Bob Truett

Truett was raised in Texas and the vicinity of Hot Springs, Arkansas. He graduated from the University of Arkansas with high honors in 1955 and spent a few years in the U.S. Army. During part of his service he was the wildlife conservation officer at Fort Chaffee. He worked at the Alum Rock Park Zoo in San Jose, California and the Cincinnati Zoo before being hired to manage the reptile house at Chicago's Lincoln Park Zoo. He was brought to Birmingham to succeed Tom Briskey as director.

During his first ten years as zoo director, Truett, his wife, Lisa and their two children, Marietta and Bobby, lived in the WPA-built director's house in Lane Park. The family kept several pets, including five dogs and a boa constrictor.

Truett inherited a troubled park with very few resources to properly maintain and improve its facilities. Over time he ushered in improvements in management that allowed the zoo to survive

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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

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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.

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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Arkansas Creationism Bill Defeated in Tight Vote

American Atheists

On April 22nd, the church/state separation watchdog American Atheists praised the lawmakers on the Arkansas Senate Education Committee who rejected the controversial creationism bill (HB 1701) in a **3-3 vote the evening of April 21st**. The Arkansas House had passed this unconstitutional bill on April 7, drawing **national criticism** and **condemnation**.

Both Arkansas Department of Education Assistant Commissioner **Stacy Smith** and Senator **Linda Chesterfield** noted the impossibility of teaching a single creationist myth that isn't based on a particular religious tradition. "There's lots of creation theories out there [according to] different religions," said Smith. Senator Chesterfield noted problems arising from Buddhist, Muslim, or Hindu public school instructors teaching their own creationist myths to Christian children.

"This is a victory for religious freedom and for students and teachers of all faiths—including Christianity—as well as atheists and nonreligious people," said **Alison Gill**, Vice President for Legal and Policy at American Atheists, **who submitted testimony**. "As the Christian resident who testified put it, Arkansas should not be 'turning religion into science.'"

Representative **Mary Bentley**, the bill's sponsor, admitted the proselytizing nature of the bill during her comments. "We see that the heavens declare the glory of God," she said, citing Psalms 19:1. Failing to name any contemporary scientists who advocate creationism, she cited theist **Sir Isaac Newton**, "who started the scientific revolution back quite a few centuries back [sic]."



"When you have to go all the way back to the 17th century to justify your creationism bill, you know your argument is doomed," said **Nick Fish**, president of American Atheists. "Thankfully, Arkansas schools' science programs will remain in the 21st century."

"By rejecting this creationism bill, Arkansas will be spared unnecessary lawsuits that would drain needed resources from an **educational system already ranked near the bottom** by measures of student attainment. Lawmakers did the right thing. This bill was unconstitutional through-and-through," said Gill.

HB 1701 is not the first attempt to legislate creationism in Arkansas. In *McLean v. Arkansas Board of Education* (1982), a federal court struck down Arkansas Act 590 of 1981, an infamous creationism law. "Since creation science is not science, the conclusion is inescapable that the only real effect of Act 590 is the advancement of religion," **Judge Overton wrote in the decision**.

"Arkansas already had a creationism bill, and we made national news, and it was not good national news," Senator Chesterfield reminded her colleagues during the hearing.

"Hopefully, this is the last time we hear about an unconstitutional creationism bill coming out of Little Rock," said Fish. "Arkansas lawmakers need to find ways to improve public education, not impose their religion on it."

Connecticut Eliminates Dangerous Religious Exemptions to School Vaccination Requirements

American Atheists

On April 28th, Connecticut Governor **Ned Lamont** signed into law HB 6423, a bill that eliminates any religious exemptions from mandatory school vaccinations. Connecticut joins other nearby states which have already eliminated non-medical exemptions to vaccination requirements.

"Eliminating religious exemptions ensures that all people—whether religious or nonreligious—receive equal treatment under the law, a foundational principle of our democracy," said **Alison Gill**, Vice President for Legal and Policy, who **submitted testimony on the bill**. "This is a resounding victory for religious equality."

"No one's religious beliefs should let them expose others—especially immunocompromised children—to deadly diseases," she added. "**Studies** have shown that these types of nonmedical exemptions can cause or amplify outbreaks of preventable disease."

In *Prince v. Massachusetts* (1944), the U.S. Supreme Court said that "[t]he right to practice religion freely does not include liberty to expose the community or child to communicable disease, or the latter to ill health or death.... Parents may be free to become martyrs themselves. But it does not follow they are free, in identical circumstances, to make martyrs of their children before they reached the age of full and legal discretion when they can make that choice for themselves."

Bob Truett continued from page 1

and to attract ever-growing crowds of visitors. He helped found the Alabama Zoological Society which helped raise funding for zoo operations and expansion and instituted numerous programs for volunteers and young people. He also participated in zoo outreach programs and frequently appeared as a guest on radio and television programs.

During Truett's directorship, the Birmingham Zoo became the 11th institution accredited by the American Zoological Association. He served as an Accreditation Commissioner of the AZA from 1974 to 1979.

Truett also owned the Gymno-Vita Park, a nudist camp near Pell City, Alabama. Truett retired in November 1990 after thirty years at the zoo. In retirement, Truett was active in the Church Of The Natural Way and the Alabama Freethought Association. He also helped found the Southeastern Herpetological Society.

77 Organizations Urge New Path Forward for Biden's White House on Religious Freedom

Wall of Separation Blog - Samantha Sokol

Under President **Joe Biden**, the White House's Office of Faith-Based & Neighborhood Partnerships seems to be moving in a new direction. Biden's executive order reestablishing the partnership office recognizes that it must "preserv[e] our fundamental constitutional commitments" to equal protection and church-state separation. And longtime church-state advocate **Melissa Rogers** will lead the office.

But there's much more work to be done. Over the past four years, the **Trump** administration stripped religious freedom protections from regulations and issued memoranda, policies and executive orders encouraging the misuse of religious freedom to justify discrimination. Even before Trump, leftover policies from the **Bush** administration's "Faith-Based Initiative" allowed federal contractors and grantees to discriminate in employment with taxpayer dollars.

On April 30th, **77 religious, civil rights, labor, health, secular and women's organizations wrote to Rogers** to urge the White House's Faith-Based Office to restore critical religious freedom protections and chart a new path forward with even more robust protections. As members and allies of the Coalition Against Religious Discrimination (CARD), they include diverse groups ranging from the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the Union for Reform Judaism, the National Education Association, National Women's Law Center, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the NAACP, the Autistic Self Advocacy Network, the National Council of Churches, the ACLU, Human Rights Campaign, and us at Americans United.

All of us agree that faith-based organizations, like secular organizations, should not be allowed to take government funds and then place religious litmus tests on whom they hire, whom they serve, or what services required under the program to provide. Our letter urges the White House to take

several concrete actions, including:

I. Restoring safeguards in social service programs that were stripped by the Trump administration in their Faith-Based Regulations. Trump's regulations removed requirements that people who are receiving taxpayer-funded social services get notice of their religious freedom rights, including that they could request a referral to another provider if they are uncomfortable with the religious character of the current provider. The Trump regulations also ended the requirement that people who get services through a voucher program (known as "indirect aid") had at least one secular option to choose from. The result: Trump's rules could lead to people – especially religious minorities and the nonreligious, women and LGBTQ people – foregoing the services they need for fear of religious coercion or because they aren't informed about their rights.

That's why Americans United, along with our allies at Democracy Forward and Lambda Legal, filed a **federal lawsuit** against the Trump administration to challenge this rollback of religious freedom protections for vulnerable people who use taxpayer-funded social services. We're suing

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Biden Administration Axes Trump-Era HUD Rule that Attacked Transgender Rights

Wall of Separation Blog - Rob Boston



The administration of former President **Donald Trump** was notorious for putting into place rules and regulations that harmed LGBTQ people and undermined their rights. One by one, President **Joe Biden** has been rolling back Trump's harmful policies.

The latest to fall is a particularly cruel provision proposed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) under former Secretary **Ben Carson** that could have led to transgender people being denied access to federally funded homeless shelters, and subjected to harassment in the process.

Trump sought to weaken what's known as the Equal Access Rule. This policy, first enacted during the presidency of **Barack Obama**, guarantees that people in need of emergency housing have equal access to federally funded shelters and facilities regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Had the Trump rule been put in place, staff members at federally funded shelters would have been able to cite their religious beliefs as a reason to refuse service to transgender people. Shelters also would also have been allowed to assign transgender people space based on their sex as assigned at birth as opposed to their current gender identity. It would also have permitted personnel at these shelters to engage in intrusive questioning to determine a person's sex at birth.

Trump sought to undermine the Equal Access Rule to appease his base of Christian nationalists, who have been attacking transgender rights as the latest front in their culture wars. Had it been implemented, the change would have resulted in real harm to real people. Trump and his allies simply didn't care.

In announcing that HUD pulled the plug on the the Trump policy proposal, HUD Secretary **Marcia Fudge** said, "Access to safe, stable housing – and shelter – is a basic necessity. Unfortunately, transgender and gender non-conforming people report more instances of housing instability and homelessness than cis-gender people. Today, we are taking a critical step in affirming HUD's commitment that no person be denied access to housing or other critical services because of their gender identity. HUD is open for business for all."

The Trump-Carson policy would have furthered religious discrimination on the taxpayers' dime, but it was also simply mean-spirited. The Biden administration's decision to ditch the rule is a loss for Christian nationalists, but it's a win for all Americans who care about fairness, equality and decency.

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on behalf of several organizations, including MAZON: A Jewish Response to Hunger and Services & Advocacy for GLBT Elders (SAGE), that fund and provide services to vulnerable communities.

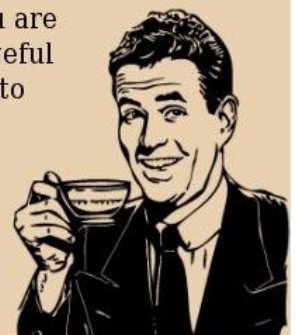
Although this lawsuit is in the pipeline, Biden can fix this problem immediately by issuing new regulations that restore the religious freedom safeguards for people who receive social services.

2. Ending federally funded employment discrimination. Existing policies allow taxpayer-funded contractors and grantees to use religion to discriminate against their employees. Biden must ensure that no one is denied a government-funded job because they follow the "wrong" religion.

3. Undoing policies, memoranda and guidance by the Trump administration that misused federal religious freedom law. Previous administrations issued policies that misused the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA) to justify religious exemptions to laws that bar discrimination. The Biden White House must rescind these policies and clarify that RFRA cannot be used to violate the civil rights of others. RFRA must be a shield to protect religious freedom, not a sword to allow discrimination.

The Biden White House has a lot to do to restore the damage to our religious freedom rights of the last four years, and has an important opportunity to chart a new path that will protect religious freedom for all Americans. With this **CARD letter** supported by 77 organizations, we hope they will use our blueprint for where to start.

We question your beliefs because you are too afraid of a vengeful fictional character to do it yourself.

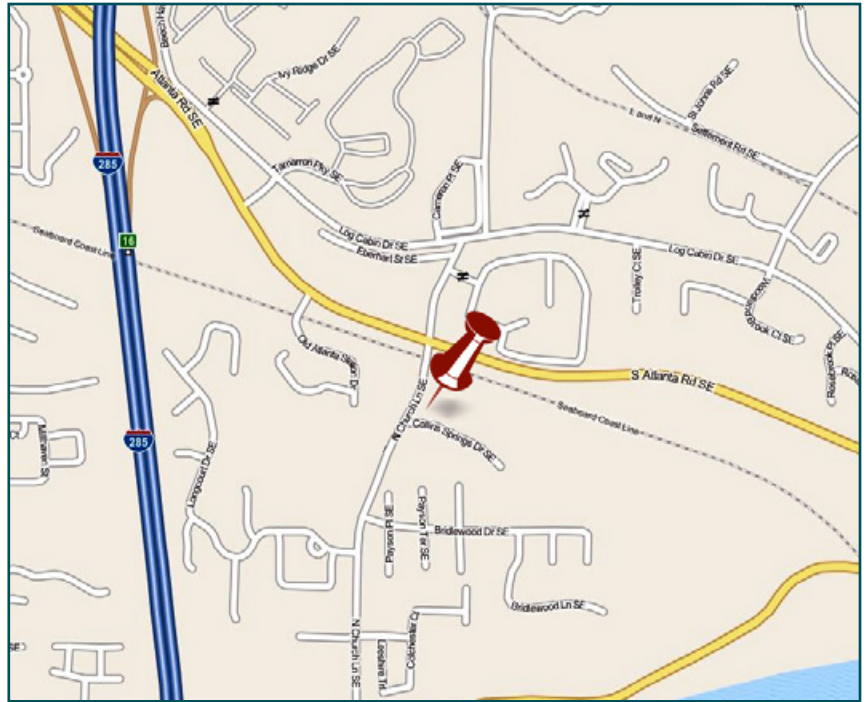


*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



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

**James Underdown
5/9/21 1:00 pm EDT
(via Zoom)**



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