

## Two meetings! Alyssa Fuller @ 1:00 pm EST and Dr. Leo Igwe @ 4:30 pm EST!

**For the first meeting** on Mother's Day, AFS has the great honor to have a representative of American Atheists, the organization's Membership Manager, **Alyssa Fuller**. Alyssa, who is now at the American Atheists as the group's membership chief, has a reputation for enriching and stimulating talks and discussion. Her interesting, thought-provoking, and helpful discussions make us eager to hear from her. The talk and discussion on Sunday, 14 May that Fuller will lead is on, **"Parents' Rights Apply to Atheists, Too!"**



**Alyssa Fuller**

Fuller invited everyone—"Join us for strategies for engaging in activism at the school board and local government level. Learn tips and tricks for pushing back against censorship, book bans, and discrimination in schools, and ways to oppose bad (and advocate for good!) policy in southern school districts."

Alyssa Fuller is a former high school teacher, research arachnologist (you can look it up!), and science museum educator who now serves as American Atheists' Membership Manager. She lives in rural South Carolina, where she actively fights to keep extremists from controlling school policies. And expect a mention or two of the need to vote in public elections at AFS Hall.

### **AFS May Meeting #1 May 14, 2023 1:00 PM (EST)**

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

## Calendar

May 14	General Meeting Live/Online	1 pm
May 14	Special Meeting Live/Online	4:30 pm
June 11	General Meeting Live/Online	1 pm

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

**For the second meeting**, Black Nonbelievers, Ethical Humanists of Atlanta, and AFS are delighted to present **Dr. Leo Igwe**, who is giving a talk entitled **"Mubarak Bala, Allegations of Blaphemy, and Humanism in Nigeria"**.

In April of 2022, Nigerian Humanist **Mubarak Bala** was sentenced to 24 years in prison for posting "blasphemous" statements about prophet Muhammad on Facebook. Bala pleaded guilty to the charges and is currently appealing the prison sentence. In the same vein, a Muslim mob attacked and lynched a Christian student in Sokoto in Northern Nigeria in May.



**Dr. Leo Igwe**

In recent years, allegations of blasphemy have been rampant, and individuals accused of blasphemy (including Muslims) have been attacked, killed, or imprisoned. In his presentation, Dr. Igwe will discuss the state of Humanism in Nigeria, efforts to free Mubarak Bala, and how allegations of blasphemy endanger the lives and rights of humanists, freethinkers, and atheists in the country.

Dr. Leo Igwe is a board member of the Humanist Association of Nigeria and Humanists International. He holds a doctoral degree in religious studies from the University of Bayreuth in Germany and wrote his thesis on witchcraft accusations in Northern Ghana. Dr. Igwe directs the **Advocacy for Alleged Witches** and the Critical Thinking Social Empowerment Foundation.

A suggested donation of \$10 will cover the cost of travel, accommodations, and support for Dr. Igwe's advocacy and work with Humanists International. No one will be turned away for lack of funds. Refreshments will be provided. **Note the different Zoom link below.**

### **May Meeting #2 May 14, 2023 4:30 PM (EST)**

To join this Zoom meeting go to this link:  
[us02web.zoom.us/join/zoom/register/tZAtf-6grDsjHddtDXdmm29wBIX3Qo-QA-in](https://us02web.zoom.us/join/zoom/register/tZAtf-6grDsjHddtDXdmm29wBIX3Qo-QA-in)

**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.



- 14 May Alyssa Fuller 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

### AFS Email List

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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](https://meetup.com/Atlanta-Freethought-Society).

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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 An AFS Publication

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### Atlanta Freethought News

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# Is This a Great Country, or What?\*

By Ed Buckner • [Letters to a Free Country](#) • [edbuckner.substack.com](mailto:edbuckner.substack.com)

Can you be a patriot and love the USA while still taking a knee during the national anthem (as **Colin Kaepernick** did in 2016)?

Can you be someone who grasps the horrors of how much so many people have suffered—Native Americans, Africans imported into slavery, Asians worked to death on the railroads, people lynched for daring to vote or for having brown or black skin, women daring to want equality before the law, people wanting to marry the one they love even though they aren't the "right" sex or skin color, Americans imprisoned in camps because others of their nation of origin or culture were at war with the US, schoolchildren murdered in mass shootings, workers exploited mercilessly and even allowed to burn to death in shirtwaist factories, foreigners bombed or burned or shot in their villages by American military weapons, people "different" in so many other ways—and still have actual affection for the nation where this history happened?

If you know and talk about all this, doesn't that show you hate America?

If you're confident that no god guided the pen of those who wrote the Declaration or the Constitution, that America is not exceptional in some supernatural way, can you really think this is a great country?

Must you have unlimited faith in the invisible hand of the market, the great power of capitalism for good, to be a patriot?

If you're not a completely jingoistic patriot, unwilling to even consider the nation's faults, can you take offense at someone who disrespects the American flag?

And what does it take in fact to disrespect the flag and by extension insult the nation and all the brave men and women who have fought and even died to protect that flag?

I think my own view on the flag is straightforward, but I know not everyone agrees with me. The flag is, I think, a symbol of what is great about the US and it is just a piece of cloth. Cutting or burning or allowing a flag to touch the ground may be rude and disrespectful. Allowing one you fly to get battered and torn and not replacing it is likely disrespectful.

What about burning an American flag as a protest against national policy of some sort? That's something I just wouldn't do. Unless. As my son **Michael Buckner** has said, "I won't burn a flag in protest unless it's made illegal or unconstitutional—that I'll protest by burning a flag!" Me, too. The flag is a symbol, not a sacred or even by itself important thing. Of course, I can hear you saying, "Ed, you don't think anything is sacred!" And in a religious sense, you're right. But I think family, friends, and good neighbors, even school children in some town I never heard of, are far more important than just as symbols.

A good friend, neighbor, and fellow veteran called me recently to complain about a nearby large apartment complex (neither of us lives there) flying an American flag that had gotten downright raggedy. I understood why that made him unhappy. He suggested he might approach the management of the apartments with his complaint, telling them that they were being disrespectful and offering them a replacement flag at his own expense. I knew he would not be able to say they were breaking the law. (There is a flag code that the VFW discusses on their website.) But I did think he might succeed. I strongly suspect that the apartment people who put that flag up are hypocrites—flying it to aid their business, not because they are patriotic. But a veteran approaching them in that way would, I think, make them feel guilty and afraid if they did not comply.

But context matters greatly. And hypocrisy, not always surely detectable, is often at the core of what counts. This is similar, as I see it, to putting a

religious symbol on your business card: if you're piously showing off your faith or, especially, if you're falsely claiming to be of a faith to mislead customers into thinking you're honest or will treat them right, that's hypocritical (see Matthew 6:5-6 if you're a Christian). If you fly the American flag to falsely convince customers you'll give them a good deal on those used cars in your lot, that's no less hypocritical.

But the biggest hypocrisy about patriotism is the sort that demands that everyone follow your prescription for proper behavior or you'll declare them not as good an American as you are. If, like me, you saw Colin Kaepernick's actions as a calm, dignified, thoroughly patriotic expression, even if not the way you'd behave, then that is true patriotism.

And that leads me to my conclusion.

## What I Think is Great about America

To paraphrase a line **Joe Biden** uses, I want to compare the USA not to an almighty utopia but to the alternative. And to understand that putting our nation first or at least high on a list doesn't mean putting down all other nations.

We don't have to turn a blind eye to our faults and history and pretend all is well.

Of one like me who knows pretty well the extensive sorry history of this nation and who nevertheless claims to love it, it's only fair to ask me why. Part of it is that despite those many historical horrors, we have gotten better. And I like our national parks and other natural beauty; I value much of our human-created beauty and interest—architecture, literature, landscape (well, OK, not the golf courses), charming small towns, and more. But all that is not the main thing that makes America great (consistently—not "great again"). The trite, cliched, one word summary for this is "freedom!" And that's the word that works for me—but it needs some explaining—and some qualifying.

If someone values only the freedom to agree with him, that is rank hypocrisy. If someone values and works to protect the freedom of everyone (including that of people who vigorously oppose what he wants vigorously supported), that is patriotism.

When my friend, the late **Jack McKinney** (1930-2018) approached me about publishing a book of some of the letters to the editor we've both written over the years (bunches of them), I was

**"Country" continued on Page 4**

**“Country” continued from Page 3**

delighted. The result: *Opinions Are Like Rear Ends: And We Show Ours in This Collection of Letters to the Editor* (Freethought Press, 2008). And Jack suggested that we dedicate our book to **Dan Tilli**, a man neither of us had ever met or knew. We did, and here’s why—

Monday, Jan. 22, 2007 / The Atlanta Journal-Constitution / ajc.com / A4

**Secret Service pays visit to letter writer**

A Bethlehem, Pa., man who wrote in a letter to the editor about Saddam Hussein’s execution saying “they hanged the wrong man” got a visit from Secret Service agents concerned he was threatening President Bush. Dan Tilli, 81, whose letter was published in *The Express-Times of Easton, Pa.*, said, “I didn’t say who — I could’ve meant [Osama] bin Laden.” He said two Secret Service agents questioned him Thursday, searched his apartment and took pictures of him. The Secret Service confirmed the encounter but said Tilli was deemed not a threat.

When I say America is great, it *should* mean no American is ever in trouble for ridiculing or criticizing any elected official. (Actually threatening one is a different matter and unacceptable.) **Trump or Biden, George W. Bush or Barack H. Obama**—whoever—every citizen in this land can criticize them, call them names, belittle them, etc. This may sound as if I value sophomoric disrespectfulness—but that’s not it.

What I value is real freedom, best summed up in a 1943 US Supreme Court decision. That decision, in a case known as *West Virginia Board of Education v. Barnette*, was one of the best Supreme Court decisions ever and directly related to respect for the flag.

Here’s why:

In a 6-to-3 decision, the Court overruled its decision in *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* and held that compelling public schoolchildren to salute the flag was unconstitutional. In an opinion written by Robert Houghwout Jackson, the Court found that the First Amendment cannot enforce a unanimity of opinion on any topic, and national symbols like the flag should not receive a level of deference that trumps constitutional protections. He argued that curtailing or eliminating dissent was an improper and ineffective way of generating unity.

(from <https://www.oyez.org/cases/1940-1955/319us624>)

I value the First Amendment. I cherish what Justice **Robert H. Jackson** wrote in that case:

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or other matters of opinion or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.

This is a free country, one where “citizen” is the highest rank. Despite the nonsense often flung around to the contrary, a socialist and an atheist can be a true American, a patriot. We honor “Mr. [or Ms.?] President” not “Your Royal Highness.” A true patriot insists that the USA needs to progress. As comedian **Jim Jefferies** says, “I think we can all do better.”

\*My title was inspired by this bit of dialogue in the movie *Night Shift* (1982):

**Chuck Lumley** : As we sit here and idly chat, there are woman, female human beings, rolling around in strange beds with strange men, and we are making money from that.

**Bill Blazejowski** : Is this a great country, or what?

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# Florida's Book Bans: A Christian Nationalist Model For Every State?

by Monica Smith • AU.org • Wall of Separation

Florida has become a hotbed of far-right legislation. Since 2018, the state has introduced a wide range of discriminatory policies that aim to punish minority groups. These bills have become a blueprint for Christian Nationalists throughout the country to try to pass in other states.

One of their biggest battlefields is public education, and Christian Nationalists are actively succeeding in completely altering the education system in Florida. One of the latest attacks has been on school libraries, which have been targeted fiercely by book bans.

## Attacks On Books Escalate

The assault began in March of 2022 when legislation known as HB 1467 was signed into law by Gov. Ron DeSantis (R). The bill created new guidelines that have made it far easier to ban books in schools. Proponents said it would address explicit content such as pornography; however, this was already banned in schools. Instead, the bill is being used to remove LGBTQ+ and African American history from schools. It now takes just one complaint of something being “inappropriate” for a book to be pulled from a school or even from an entire county system. This is a narrative that Christian Nationalists around the country have pushed, and in Florida, they are succeeding in getting inclusive content removed.

In Duval County alone, where I live, approximately 176 books have already been removed from classrooms since the bill was passed. The Duval County Public School system and far-right legislators claim that the removed books are not banned but are only under review. However, until books are approved by a school media specialist, they must be taken out of classrooms, which is essentially a ban. Furthermore, the process for a book to be approved can take time, since a school media specialist must individually read and sign off on each book. In many Florida districts, these positions are severely understaffed, which lengthens the delays.

In addition, there are no clear guidelines in place for specialists to follow, which means the status of a book can vary wildly between school districts and counties. The fate of a book falls on schools' media specialists and their interpretation of what is appropriate for children.

## LGBTQ-Themed Books Targeted

The bulk of these bans target the LGBTQ+ community, with several books that simply include or depict queer relationships being the sole reason books were removed. LGBTQ+ literature is being labeled as inappropriate for children, which correlates with the rise in LGBTQ+ violence in the state. Instead of helping kids, these book bans harm them; young people deserve to see themselves reflected in a library's books.

African American history is also being targeted. Books that depict civil rights activists, such as Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King Jr., have been removed from schools. Children's books that depict the civil rights movement already are edited to present the history in a digestible format for young children to understand. Under the new laws, this crucial history is being reimagined as actively harmful for kids to learn about, and as a result, that history is simply being removed from school libraries. Books that depict Asian American, Native American, Latinx American and other minority experiences are also being banned or are sitting in review throughout the state.

The spate of book banning comes at a challenging time for Florida's education system. The state was already dealing with an education crisis due to COVID-19, and the bans only exist to widen the education gap in Florida. The state continues to rank lower nationwide in reading and math abilities. Genuine education reforms are being ignored as the state focuses on removing minority voices from education. The results could take years to play out, but Florida's current path, which emphasizes indoctrination over education, does a disservice to its kids.



## Fighting Back Against Censorship

Several organizations are working to combat these book bans, including the [American Library Association](#), which tracks which books have been banned nationally, [EveryLibrary](#), the American Civil Liberties Union and the Urban League. Local bookstores are also protesting the bans by creating displays of targeted books and actively hosting community events to connect children with these titles.

Since its founding more than 75 years ago, Americans United has opposed religiously based censorship. AU believes that young people in Florida, and every state, should have the right to read and learn without interference from Christian Nationalists who fear knowledge, inclusion and progress.

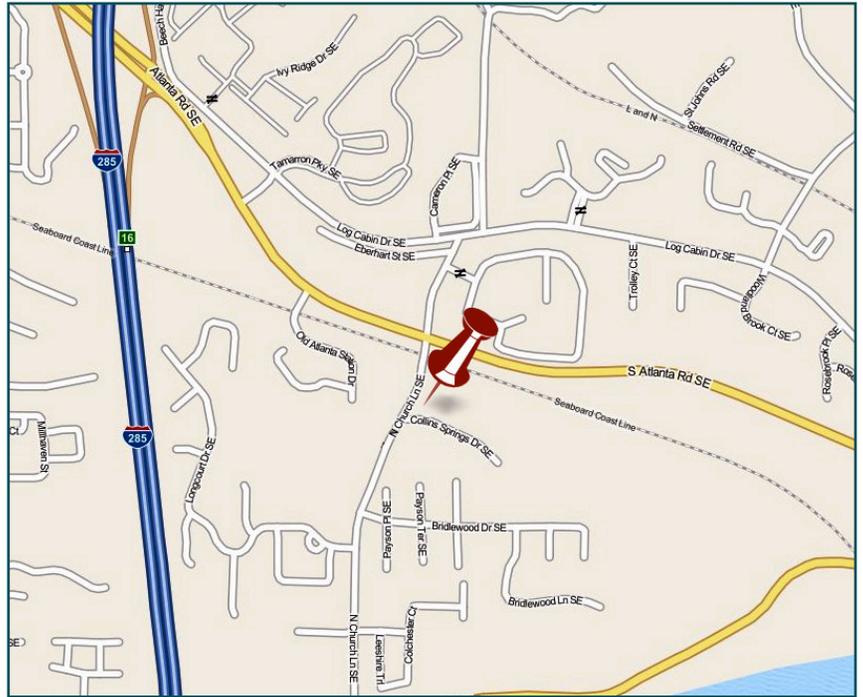
*Monica Smith is a member of Americans United's Youth Organizing Fellowship.*

*Dare To Think  
For Yourself!*



**AF Hall  
4775 N. Church Lane SE  
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**Alyssa Fuller  
1:00 pm EST  
Dr. Leo Igwe  
4:30 pm EST  
(Both on May 12)**



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