

Rob Boston of Americans United - “The Status of Separation: Where We Are and How We’ll Move Forward”

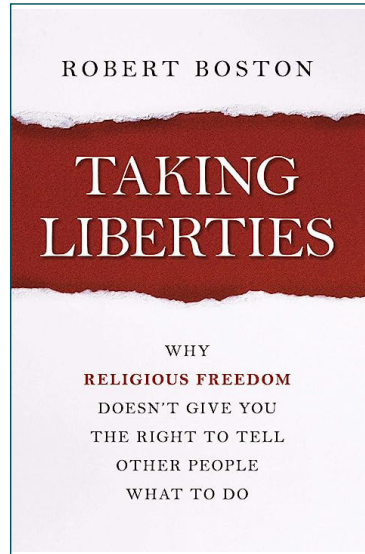
AFS has the great honor to have a return speaker, **Rob Boston** of Americans United, the national organization’s Senior Adviser. Rob has been one of the best speakers—several times—we’ve ever had. And, in fact, he was our very first speaker at Atlanta Freethought Hall many years ago. AU is a crucial national organization, and we count on AU and on Rob in particular to lead the fight for separation of government and religion and to keep us informed about it. Boston always has the important details readily at hand and he presents them, every time, in thoroughly interesting and thought-provoking fashion. The talk and discussion on Sunday, 11 June that Boston will lead is on, **“The Status of Separation: Where We Are and How We’ll Move Forward.”**



Rob Boston

Boston said, “Separation of church and state is being steadily eroded by the Supreme Court

and challenged by resurgent Christian Nationalism.” In this talk, Rob Boston will discuss how church-state separation has been undermined, and he’ll examine prospects for the future and how we can rebuild the church-state wall.



Rob Boston is Senior Adviser

at **Americans United for Separation of Church and State** and Editor of *Church & State*, AU’s monthly membership magazine.

Calendar

- June 11 AFS Board Meeting at Hall 11 pm
- June 11 General Meeting Live/Online 1 pm
- July 9 General Meeting Live/Online 1 pm

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

Rob, who has worked at Americans United since 1987, is the author of four books: *Close Encounters with the Religious Right: Journeys into the Twilight Zone of Religion and Politics* (Prometheus Books, 2000); *The Most Dangerous Man in America? Pat Robertson and the Rise of the Christian Coalition* (Prometheus Books, 1996); *Why the Religious Right Is Wrong About Separation of Church and State* (Prometheus Books, 1993; second edition, 2003) and, most recently, *Taking Liberties: Why Religious Freedom Doesn't Give You The Right To Tell Other People What To Do* (Prometheus Books, 2014).

Having great programs like this one for our members and visitors makes us proud, and we expect to continue doing that throughout 2023 and beyond.

The Boston program, free and open to the public, will be preceded by a few minutes of Zoom-and-in-person-based socializing starting about 12:30 P.M. Eastern Daylight Time in the US, for any interested. The program will start at about 1 P.M. (EDT) on Sunday, 11 June, via Zoom and at AFS Hall (air conditioning will, we hope, be repaired—but if not, we’ll have fans and can open windows). Details (the same as last month) on the Zoom meeting are shown below.

AFS June Meeting June 11, 2023 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

To join Zoom meeting go to this link:
us02web.zoom.us/j/89006560911
Also at Atlanta Freethought Hall

For the latest in upcoming AFS events, join our Meetup group!
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 and also 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.



11 June	Rob Boston of Americans United
9 July	Dan Barker of FFRF
13 Aug	TBA
10 Sep	TBA
8 Oct	TBA
12 Nov	TBA

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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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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
or luara.mom@gmail.com

(Tentative) 2023 Board of Directors

Mark Banks – 770-354-1546
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Book Review of Douglas A. Blackmon *Slavery By Another Name*

By Charles Shapiro

Douglas A. Blackmon's book *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (Doubleday, New York 2008) tells an astounding story of fraud, coercion and violence perpetrated by Southern whites on poor black people from just a few years after the American Civil War until the start of the second world war, a period of close to 80 years. It's a searing read. If you look closely through your family history, you probably have startling connections to this crime. My people owned a turpentine camp near Mobile which probably used slave labor after the Civil War.

Blackmon skillfully includes both a narrative of the larger sweep of history and meticulously researched stories of the people who lived through it. This technique keeps the book's tone objective, even when he's describing the most horrific abuses. He backs up his research with generous footnotes, only a few of them substantive. That choice makes the book read more like journalism than history.

The story starts just a few years after the Civil War, when much of the Southeast was devastated. Agriculture and industry had ground to a halt, partly because of war losses, and partly because the black former slaves who had the skills to work the land were no longer going to do so for free. Blackmon tells this story through the history of the **Cottinghams**, a wealthy farming family with a large plantation about fifty miles southwest of Birmingham. In the late 1860s, things were bleak on the Cottingham plantation:

If one looked out from Elisha [Cottingham]'s porch in December 1868, across the crop rows and down past the creek, the only green in a nearly colorless winter landscape was in the short scruffy needles of twisted cedars he had planted long ago, along the wagon drive from the house. The slave cabins, nearly two dozen of them, were mostly empty now. Even Scipio, the old man slave who had worked Elisha's farm nearly as long as the white master himself, was gone down the road. Already, weather and uselessness were doing the shacks in.

Black people actually had a moment of power just after the war, but they were beaten back by white violence and corruption. Blackmon goes into fascinating detail on this, explaining how white attitudes hardened against former slaves in the years after the Civil War, and how that in turn gave rise to the institutional and cultural mechanisms that kept former slaves out of power

and coerced work from them. By 1890 or so, a system of legal debt bondage was in place across the South which kept thousands of black men enslaved, in spite of the war just fought to end slavery.

The system worked like this: A local sheriff would arrest a likely-looking black man (or woman) for some relatively minor offense. Men were sucked into the system for 'vagrancy', or illegally riding the train, or even simple insolence. After a brief (or often no) trial, the sheriff would assess a fine larger than his victim could easily pay. Then the unfortunate alleged criminal would be cast into jail. A local farmer or industrialist would offer to pay the fine in exchange for some period of labor from the victim. Then it was off to the turpentine camp, or the cotton field, or the mine, or the brick factory, where workers were kept chained up or in cages and beaten for trying to run away, and women were routinely raped by their overseers. Debts for food and clothing were piled on to the original fine to keep workers enslaved. Many didn't survive this. Others were permanently injured. None were paid for their work. Several pages of grim photographs show what happened to people in these situations.

Blackmon also details the attempts at reform of this system, usually the result of federal investigations sparked by publicity or the occasional crusading prosecutor. Some whites did in fact go on trial for enslaving people, but they were often able to avoid any penalty by exploiting a legal loophole. The 13th amendment contains an exception allowing slavery "as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted." There were laws on the books outlawing "peonage" (imprisoning people for debt), but the defendants often successfully made the claim that buying people from the state for their unpaid fines and forcing them to work those debts off somehow did not fit that definition. The federal government was also strikingly unwilling to get involved in what it considered a state legal matter, and state courts assessed only token fines for the wealthy men actually convicted. None went to jail.

Atlanta is not free of the taint of these crimes. The Chattahoochee Brick Factory used as many as 1200 slaves in the most brutal conditions. "Witnesses testified that guards holding long horse whips struck any worker who slowed to a walk or paused. By the end of every day, 200,000 or more bricks were loaded on the railcars." **James W. English**, who owned Chattahoochee Brick, eventually became mayor of Atlanta. He also founded First National Bank of Atlanta, which grew to be one of the richest banks in the Southeast. First National was eventually bought by Wachovia and then Wells Fargo, where no doubt some of its ill-gotten gains persist to this day. **Joel Hurt**, the developer who built Inman Park and Druid Hills and for whom Hurt Park is named, made much of his fortune from slave labor in coal mines around Lookout Mountain in Tennessee. Court testimony about that operation includes accounts of men lost in the mines and abandoned, or beaten to death for being too hurt to work.

The Southern legal debt bondage system ended only with the attack on Pearl Harbor. **Franklin Roosevelt** realized that it would be difficult to get black people to fight for a country which enslaved or murdered so many of their friends and relatives. The day after the attack, Franklin's attorney general Francis Biddle issued Circular Number 3591, which explicitly outlawed slavery in the United States for legal debts or any other reason. Blackmon dates the true end of slavery in the United States to 1951. That is well within living memory. As he points out, ". . . no one who reads this book can wonder as to the origins, depth, and visceral foundation of so many African Americans' fundamental distrust of our judicial process."

FFRF lauds poll showing half of Americans lack confidence in God's existence

ffrf.org

A welcome new survey finds that only half of Americans are confident in the existence of God.

Less than 50 percent of Americans are now sure God exists, dropping from 60 percent in 2008. The General Social Survey by **NORC, the University of Chicago's research organization**, also shows that church membership and attendance, which have declined for decades, have reached the lowest figures recorded for the past half century. These latest findings are in addition to other recent heartening studies showing the continuing growth of the religiously unaffiliated.

The NORC survey, just as with **Pew Research Center**, also reveals that 29 percent of Americans claimed no religion, up from 23 percent in 2018 and 5 percent in 1972.

"We have a data point from the 1950s where only 3 percent of people said they had no [religious] affiliation," says **Mark Chaves**, Anne Firor Scott Distinguished Professor of Sociology at Duke University. "It got up to 8 or 9 percent in the 1990s, and it's sort of accelerated since then."

NORC found that 34 percent of Americans never go to church. Likewise, 34 percent pray "less than once a week or never." Only 4 percent say they attend once a month and another 4 percent attend "nearly every week," meaning any given Sunday most Americans aren't in church. And a scarce 15 percent evince "a great deal of confidence" in religion, compared to the peak of 45 percent voicing confidence in religion back in 1974.

A mere 14 percent identify as "very religious." The survey found that 6 percent believe in God "sometimes" and 7 percent responded that they "don't know and [there's] no way to find out." Another 7 percent are atheists, saying they do not believe in God.

"They're not saying night prayers, morning prayers, taking their kids to church," says **Thomas Groome**, a professor in theology and religious

education at Boston College, about the "Nones" (religiously unaffiliated). "Whatever religion we have going forward will be by persuasion and choice and not by inherited identity."

While church attendance is down, **nondenominational Protestants (called the "nons") are on the rise**. In the 1970s, "nons" were a tiny percentage of overall Protestants, but today are nearly 15 percent of Americans, and the second-largest religious group after Catholics. (Let's not forget that the "**Nones**" are the largest group by religious identification, surpassing Catholics or any single religious denomination.)

While almost 30 percent of Americans identify with no religion or as nonreligious, another 20 percent clearly have strong doubts, given the findings that 50 percent are not confident in God's existence.

FFRF Co-President **Dan Barker** has long noted this undercurrent of doubt among religionists: "Scientists do not join hands every Sunday and sing, 'Yes gravity is real! I know gravity is real! I will have faith! I believe in my heart that what goes up, up, up must come down, down, down. Amen!' If they did, we would think they were pretty insecure about the concept."

"It looks like the United States is on track to catch up with Europe," Barker added.

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If you don't like being called a Christian Nationalist, stop promoting Christian Nationalism

by Rob Boston • AU.org • Wall of Separation

Most Christian Nationalists don't like being called Christian Nationalists. That's not surprising. Americans who are familiar with the term "Christian Nationalism" hold a **largely negative perception of it**. That's also not surprising. Americans have been accustomed over the years to living in a democracy, not a theocracy.

A recent **Fox News piece** asserted that liberals are using the term "Christian Nationalism" to marginalize conservative Christians. It quoted **Kevin McCullough**, identified as a "conservative author and radio talk show host," who said, "I don't think it's a term that people of God need to embrace ... I see it primarily as a term that the other side is using to leverage animosity against people like me and people that believe like me. I would not describe myself as a Christian Nationalist ever."

Of course McCullough wouldn't use the term – for the same reason that theocrats and fascists don't usually embrace those labels. That's why we have to look not at what Christian Nationalists call themselves but what they want to do to America.

What Christian Nationalists want

So, as someone who has been writing about Christian Nationalism in one guise or another for 35 years, please indulge me as I outline that.

Remember, the motivating ideology behind this movement is that the United States was founded and still ought to be a "Christian" nation – but the version of Christianity is a narrow one. This fallacious belief – which AU's Andrew Seidel calls "**the founding myth**" – props up the entirety of Christian Nationalism.

Followers of this movement want to base our nation's laws on their fundamentalist interpretation of Christianity, a view of that faith that isn't shared by most American Christians.

If you want to know what life would be like under **Christian Nationalist rule**, consider their political agenda:

- Abortion would be illegal in all instances, and certain forms of birth control would be outlawed.
- Public schools would be infused with fundamentalist Christianity.
- Marriage for same-sex couples would be illegal, and LGBTQ rights would be abolished. Some extreme Christian Nationalists call for punishing adults who engage in consensual same-sex relationships.
- The symbols and language of the Christian faith would be openly used by government and would dominate the public square.
- Taxpayer funds would subsidize Christian schools and a host of religious social service programs.
- Books, magazines, films, works of art and other creative expressions that offend fundamentalists would be banned.

- When science and religion come into conflict, science would have to yield.
- Religious diversity and pluralism would no longer be valued as positive features of American life. Rather, that state would use its resources to pressure people to embrace fundamentalist Christianity.
- Secular government and the concept of separation of church and state, concepts Christian Nationalists regard as evil, would be dismantled.

Americans oppose Christian Nationalism

Most Americans don't want to live in a society like this, and Christian Nationalists know it. That's why they run from the term "Christian Nationalism." (It also explains why they're increasingly **endorsing voter suppression**.)



But it's too late for that. Since the rise of the modern Religious Right in the late 1970s, Christian Nationalists have been telling us all about their repressive model society and putting it into effect whenever they can. Recent examples include the rash of state laws banning or severely restricting abortion, the host of laws attacking the rights of transgender people, proposals to shoehorn fundamentalist Christianity into public schools, the growth of school voucher programs and the

wave of book banning currently washing over the nation. (Or just look at what's going on in states like Texas and Florida.)

The Fox News article singled out Americans United as one of the groups that opposes Christian Nationalism. We'll take that as a backhanded compliment. You bet AU is proud to be spearheading the opposition to those who would transform our democracy into a theocracy – and we have no intention of letting up. The first step is not letting Christian Nationalists get away with lying about who they are and what they'd like to do.

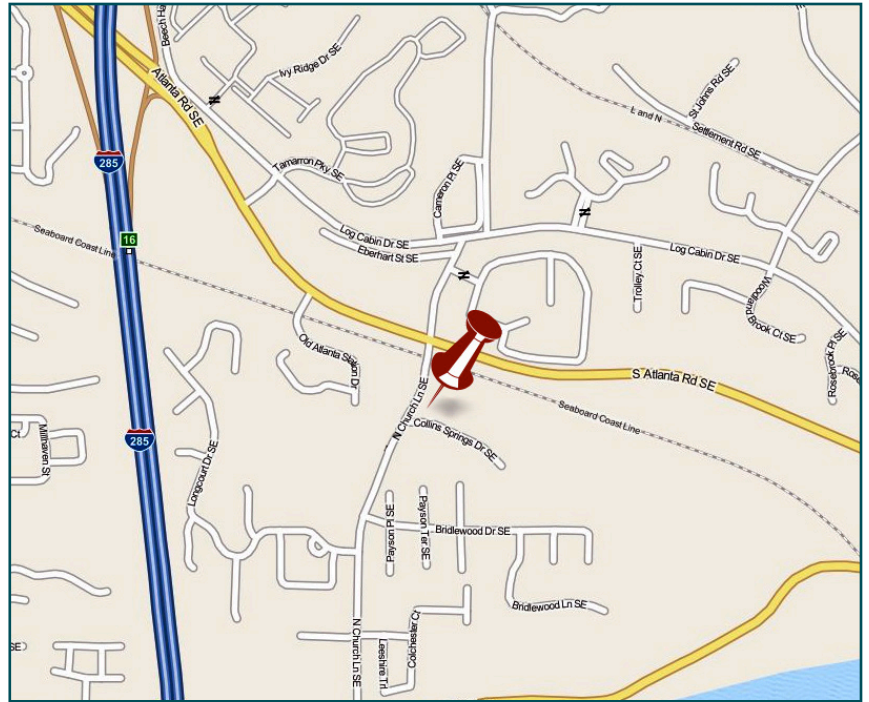
P.S. If you haven't signed **Americans United's pledge** affirming your support for church-state separation, now's the time. It's a concrete way to let Christian Nationalists know where you stand.

*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



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

**Rob Boston
6/11/23 1:00 pm EST
(via Zoom+AF Hall)**



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