

## Ed Buckner “Letter to a Free Country”

On Sunday, September 8th, we are so happy to announce that **Ed Buckner**, former AFS leader and former official of the Council for Secular Humanism and of American Atheists, will talk (live and via Zoom) on “Letter to a Free Country.”



**Ed Buckner**

Buckner, who has given talks to AFS before, is an experienced debater and speaker. With his son **Michael**, he wrote *In Freedom We Trust: An Atheist Guide to Religious Liberty* (2013). He writes a blog called **Letters to a Free Country** (<https://edbuckner.substack.com/>) (the title of the talk is actually older than the blog).

Before the meeting, starting at 11, we will have a potluck lunch, with suggestions of what to bring in the box to the lower right. We’d love to see you and eat a meal with you in person, but if you can’t make it to Atlanta Freethought Hall on Sunday, we welcome you to join us in the General Meeting via Zoom, with our thanks!

### **AFS September Meeting Sep 8, 2024 1:00-2:30 PM (eastern)**

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

### **AFS Calendar**

Sep 8	Potluck Lunch	11 am
Sep 8	General Meeting (Live/Online)	1 pm
Oct 13	Board of Directors Meeting	11 am
Oct 13	General Meeting (Live/Online)	1 pm
Nov 10	Potluck Lunch	11 am
Nov 10	General Meeting (Live/Online)	1 pm

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

## IN FREEDOM WE TRUST

AN ATHEIST GUIDE TO  
RELIGIOUS LIBERTY



EDWARD M. BUCKNER  
MICHAEL E. BUCKNER

### **The September Potluck**

Before the September 8th meeting we will have a Potluck Lunch, starting at 11:00. Join AFS members and guests for some good food and great socializing. Please bring food according to the first letter of your last name:

- A-G: Bring a side dish**
- H-P: Bring a main dish**
- Q-Z: Bring a dessert**

*AFS will provide drinks, plates and silverware.*

**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 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.



8 Sep Ed Buckner: “Letter to a Free Country”

13 Oct Alison Gill: “Project 2025”

10 Nov TBA

8 Dec 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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## Atlanta Freethought News An AFS Publication

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### Atlanta Freethought News

Vol. 30, Number 9, September 2024 CE  
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## Skepticism, Pragmatism and Empiricism

Dwight Lyman • Preface to Atheism

<https://dwrightlyman.substack.com/p/skepticism-pragmatism-and-empiricism>

From the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on Pragmatism...

Richard Rorty (1931–2007) turned consciously to pragmatism to rectify what he saw as mainstream epistemology's crucial mistake: naively conceiving of language and thought as 'mirroring' the world. Rorty's bold and iconoclastic attacks on this 'representationalism' birthed a so-called *neopragmatism* to which a number of influential recent philosophers have contributed (e.g. Hilary Putnam, Robert Brandom and Huw Price). Other pragmatists have objected to Rorty's blithe dismissal of truth as a topic better left undiscussed (Rorty 1982), and have sought to rehabilitate classical pragmatist ideals of objectivity (e.g. Susan Haack, Christopher Hookway and Cheryl Misak). These philosophers are now sometimes referred to as *New Pragmatists*. I

I think Rorty gets a fundamental point right: "mainstream epistemology's crucial mistake: naively conceiving of language and thought as 'mirroring' the world." It's not a *mirror* of the world, rather part of a neuron-constructed *stand-in* (or model) for a world that is *in its nature* unknowable.

When I read the Stanford article on pragmatism, I notice an inadequate emphasis on the biological nature of experience—by which I mean, a failure to realize that all experience is created by the brain, and therefore all knowing is (1) species-specific and (2) a stand-in for the world, not an interaction with the world.

Yes, we exist within the world and interact with it, but *our minds do not interact with the world*. Our bodies sample the world in various ways (collecting photons, etc) and from those samples our brains construct our senses (which are the first level of the stand-in). On top of the first level (possible only because the first level is sensual, that is, composed of qualia) objectification occurs which create objects with properties and this enables knowing including cognition (language and concepts, etc).

Where *pragmatism* comes in is that the whole aim of this sensual/objectification/knowledge/memory/learning system is to benefit us in navigating an otherwise unknown/unknowable world.

Where *skepticism* comes in is that the whole reason we evolved this sensual/objectification/knowledge/memory/learning system is precisely because the world is fundamentally unknowable, and the system stands-in for the world to give us a map/model we can "know" and utilize to navigate. Thus *knowing* is extremely valuable to us, and yet we never know the world "as it is."

We can't know the world as it is because it is not composed of the same stuff as knowing. The world is *physical*, and knowing is *sensual* and *mental*—the stuff of consciousness.

And right here we have the central hypothesis of naturalism: that *knowing* is the stuff of consciousness, and that the world is *not*. The hypothesis says that the world (devoid of consciousness) existed, and then some organisms in the world evolved neurons able to create consciousness within themselves.

And *that* is where consciousness exists, in there with the neurons creating it. Consciousness interacts with those neurons, is bound to them. And so consciousness—from senses to meanings to emotions—interacts only with neurons within organisms in the physical world. There alone is where sensations exist, mathematics exists, information exists, meanings exist.

Immediately, you likely object that information exists in books, in computer files, in road signs, even in flowers and trees and bugs and so on. Yes, we talk that way. But it doesn't.

Information, like all consciousness, is an *experience* created by neurons in our brain. Yes we have invented an ingenious thing called written language which allows us to modify the world around us in a way that enables us to share common information experiences between us, inside our collective brains. We talk very inexactly when we call written words or symbols "information." They are the *code* that enables each of us (if we know the language or code) to have similar information experiences. Similar thoughts.

This is an important point worth repeating. Meanings don't actually exist on the



From: Ed Buckner <edbuckner@bellsouth.net>

Subject: LTE in re Dan Flynn's column

Date: August 2, 2024 at 3:47:23 PM EDT

To: letters@mdjonline.com

Dear Editor:

In his 2 August column, "Thank You for Your Service," Dan Flynn asserts that "... The average American must admit America was much better off when God and people of faith were prominently serving in our schools, universities, government, sports, and business."

This average American (ok, I'm way older than average) admits no such thing.

Women and ethnic minorities living as second-class (or worse) citizens, false presumptions of religious and political agreement, and more violent crime (you can look it up) all suggest we're better off now—when prominent people may be quite religious (President Biden, for example) or quite secular.

In freedom we trust.

Sincerely,

Ed Buckner

author of *In Freedom We Trust* (2013)

Proud to have worn the uniform of our country

(Letter to Editor published 16 Aug 2024)

paper or the screen. Meanings only exist in us when we read words on the paper or screen. If we are a foreigner, or a non-human species who only sees squiggly crud when looking at the screen, its "meanings" aren't experienced.

Writing is a code to generate shared meanings in our brains. Don't know the code? You won't experience the meanings.

You might argue, well, our consciousness interacted with the physical world when we wrote words on the paper. No, we interacted with the paper, our *consciousness* did not. *It's* only role was within our brain, which in turn decided to move our arm and fingers to write on the paper. We interact.

In contrast, our consciousness is a tool used within the brain by the brain. A tool *for* the brain. Just as the brain is a tool for the body (among other roles, the brain is the body's *decider*).

Modern neuroscience makes these points clear. As Jeff Hawkins, author of *A Thousand Brains* (2022), explains

There are no sensors in the brain itself, so the neurons that make up your brain are sitting in the dark, isolated from the world outside. The

**Skepticism continued on page 4**

**Skepticism continued from page 3**

only way your brain knows anything about reality is through the sensory nerve fibers that enter the skull. The nerve fibers coming from the eyes, ears and skin look the same, and the spikes that travel along them are identical. There is no light or sound entering the skull, only electrical spikes.<sup>2</sup>

He continues

“And since we do not perceive spikes, everything we do perceive must be fabricated in the brain. Even the most basic feelings of light, sound and touch are creations of the brain; they only exist in its model of the world.”<sup>3</sup>

This means that we don’t perceive the world; what we perceive is instead a sensual “stand-in” for the world, a “virtual reality” created by the brain. Hawkins again,

“The truth is, we perceive our model of the world, not the world itself or the rapidly changing spikes entering the skull. As we go about our day, the sensory inputs to the brain invoke the appropriate parts of our world model, but what we perceive and what we believe is happening is the model. Our reality is similar to the brain-in-a-vat hypothesis; we live in a simulated world, but it is not in a computer—it is in our head.”<sup>4</sup>

Thus, we do not “perceive” the world around us; what we “perceive” is a virtual reality or simulacrum created by the brain and which evolved to stand-in for the world. It provides the organism (hopefully) with a reliable basis for action.

In this context, philosophical skepticism begins to make a lot of sense.

Again, this bears repeating. Biological organisms like us have no way of perceiving or knowing the organism-independent external (“physical”) reality. What we know is the “virtual reality” and corresponding cortical “model” which the brain creates and presents to us from hints the body has obtained via its sense organs. This virtual reality is what we naively mistake for the external world around us.

From this it follows...

1. Knowledge is part of a stand-in the brain uses in order to improve its decision-making.
2. There is no direct interaction between the stand-in and the world outside

us.

3. The “physical” world outside us is not what we actually “know” (even though it’s what we are concerned with). What we know is the brain’s stand-in.
4. We make the stand-in more useful by acting in the world—that is, testing for usefulness and modifying the stand-in accordingly.

Again Hawkins

Recall that the neocortex is constantly making predictions. Predictions are how the brain tests whether its model of the world is correct; an incorrect prediction indicates something is wrong with the model and needs to be fixed. A prediction error causes a burst of activity in the neocortex, which directs our attention to the input that caused the error. By attending to the mis-predicted input, the neocortex relearns that part of the model. This ultimately leads to a modification of the brain’s model to more accurately reflect the world. Model repair is built into the neocortex, and normally it works reliably.<sup>5</sup>

I call this pragmatic empiricism—which turns out to be the method of the sciences.

- 1 *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Pragmatism*, captured August 22, 2024. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/pragmatism/>
- 2 Jeff Hawkins, *A Thousand Brains: A New Theory of Intelligence*, (2022), page 173. See <https://www.numenta.com/resources/books/a-thousand-brains-by-jeff-hawkins/>
- 3 *Ibid*, page 174.
- 4 *Ibid*, page 175.
- 5 *Ibid*, pages 178-179.

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## Florida's Osceola County School District said no to chaplains in public schools. Others should follow suit.

Rob Boston • Americans United for Separation of Church and State  
<https://www.au.org/the-latest/articles/osceola-county-school-district/>

Public schools are going back into session around the country, including Florida, where school boards face a conundrum: Should they bring chaplains into the schools?

Florida, the font of many bad ideas these days, passed a law earlier this year allowing chaplains in public schools. Supposedly, the law is designed to help districts provide counseling services to students. The problem is, counselors and chaplains are not the same. The former are trained to provide guidance and mental-health counseling to students, while the latter deal with spiritual issues.

### Osceola County School District's board voted no to chaplains

The state has issued a problematic model policy for districts (<https://www.au.org/the-latest/articles/florida-public-school-chaplains/>), but many local officials remain skeptical of the idea, among them board members of the Osceola County School District. The school board has been discussing the issue this summer and voted August 27 against creating a chaplaincy program in the district (<https://www.wesh.com/article/osceola-school-board-votes-chaplains-school-grounds/61989267>).

The board members made the right decision, and they should put this matter to rest for good. (You can watch a video of the meeting here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uBdg9uSiLw0>; several speakers defended the separation of church and state and spoke about the need for qualified counselors for their children, how students of minority faiths and who are nonreligious will feel like outsiders in their own schools and about the harms that LGBTQ+ students could face.)

### Rabbi Merrill Shapiro, AU chapter president in Florida, spoke out against chaplains

Prior to the vote, Rabbi Merrill Shapiro, president of the Atlantic Coast Chapter of Americans United, told Central Florida Public Media that the district should not bring chaplains into its schools (<https://www.cfpublic.org/education/2024-08-27/osceola-school-board-to-decide-fate-of-chaplains-in-schools>). He explained why the Florida model policy was so bad.

“Jefferson, Madison, our founders, wanted to save the Florida Department of Education and not allow them to get mired into this mess of deciding who’s a chaplain, who is not and what’s a religion and what’s not,” said Shapiro. “The Florida Department of Education seems to be thumbing its nose at the founders.”



### Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis singled out the Satanic Temple

And in fact, Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis has singled out the Satanic Temple, a nontheistic organization that supports church-state separation, insisting that the group won’t be allowed in schools. But that’s not his call to make. A Satanic Temple leader spoke last night and reminded Osceola board members about the First Amendment: allowing some religious groups to provide chaplains while denying that right to others would be unconstitutional.

A chaplain’s job is to provide spiritual guidance. In some contexts, such as prisons or the military where people can be without access to their home congregations, they make sense. But they have no place in our secular public schools. Students who feel the need for spiritual help can easily get that from members of the clergy outside of school hours. As local Rabbi David Kay of Congregation Ohev Shalom explained at the board meeting,

“Bringing religious leaders into the public schools is not only unnecessary, it is counterproductive.”

### If your school district implements a chaplains programs, contact AU

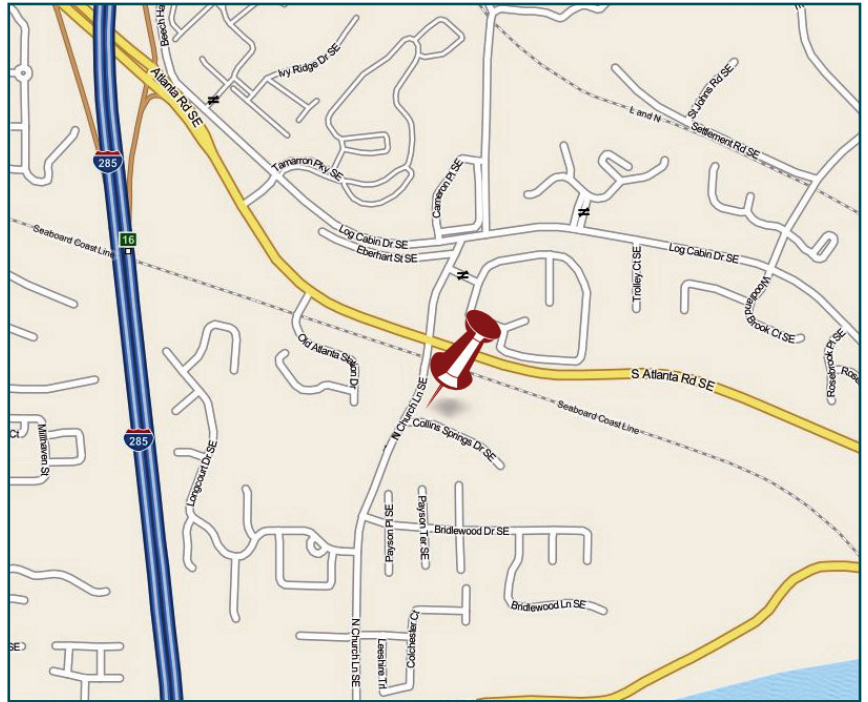
Americans United has urged Florida school districts to not implement chaplaincy programs. If you are a Florida resident with children in public schools and your district implements a chaplaincy program, contact us at <https://www.au.org/report-a-violation>.

*Dare To Think  
For Yourself!*



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

**Ed Buckner**  
**Sep 8 1:00 pm EST**  
*(At Hall and on Zoom)*  
**Potluck at 11**



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