

Valerie Tarico on “Why Abortion Access is a Moral Good”

AFS will have the great pleasure and honor of hosting, as our next speaker, a nationally highly regarded writer, thinker, and speaker, for our Zoom meeting for November, Valerie Tarico. She will talk to us about “Why Abortion Access is a Moral Good.” Tarico wrote about the subject for Free Inquiry well before the infamous US Supreme



Valerie Tarico

Court decision in a widely read essay, “Why I’m Pro-Abortion, Not Just Pro-Choice” (August/September 2016)—available online here: <https://secularhumanism.org/2016/07/cont-why-i-am-pro-abortion-not-just-pro-choice/>.

Dr. Tarico noted, by way of introduction to this talk, “We often think of abortion access as a women’s rights issue—freedom from forced childbearing. This is an important conversation: Early Abrahamic texts encode women as reproductive chattel, and fragments of this view are embedded deeply in our culture, even parts that are secular. But the benefits of abortion cascade in many ways through the lives of families and our broader society. With fundamentalism wielding the levers of political power, what can you do to help ensure that prospective parents are empowered to decide when and whether to create a child, and with whom? We all have the power to help create a norm of chosen childbearing and parenthood.”

Valerie Tarico, raised in Evangelical Fundamentalism, is a psychologist in Seattle and a prolific writer, with dozens of significant publications to her credit. She is the author of *Trusting Doubt: A former Evangelical looks at old beliefs in a new light*. Her articles about fundamentalist religion, the role of women in society, reproductive rights, and contraceptive technologies have appeared across the internet and can be found in her archive at ValerieTarico.com.

Expect to learn much more about abortion, abortion as an issue for women and for families and the whole culture, and the history of abortion

Calendar

Dec 11	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Jan 8	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Feb 12	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm

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

and the issues around it. There will be lessons for future elections and for long after, as well as likely reflection on the mid-term elections from the week before the talk. There will be time for some questions. Information below:

AFS November Meeting Nov 13, 2022 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

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




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



13 Nov	Valerie Tarico
11 Dec	Annie Laurie Gaylor
8 Jan	Chuck Miller, "Religion and White Supremacy"
12 Feb	TBD
12 Mar	TBD

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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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From the Intern Desk: An Economics Lesson for Christian Nationalists

By Jake Simon • Secular Coalition

Recently, as an economics student interning with a secular advocacy group, I found myself typing “*economics of religion*” into the search bar of Google Scholar. I expected that it would return articles on the Johnson Amendment, which concerns the political activities of churches and other tax exempt organizations, or perhaps a study or two on the impacts of religious faith on entrepreneurship or economic development. What I found was far more interesting: a field of research which began and died in 1776, before experiencing a revival these past 40 years, and which seeks to use the tools of economics to explain changes in religious affiliation and the provision of religious services.

One of the most important works in the history of economics (and, arguably, the first complete theory of political economy) is Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*, which introduced Smith’s ‘invisible hand’ of the market—the idea that markets find equilibrium automatically as a result of individuals and firms acting in self-interest. I read parts of *The Wealth of Nations* in high school, I read parts of *The Wealth of Nations* in college, and I’ve read parts of *The Wealth of Nations* since graduating this spring. But, unbeknownst to me, Smith extended his market reasoning—in sections of *Nations* considered so irrelevant by some economists as to be excluded from many modern versions of the text—to the study of religion, examining the behaviors of the clergy and religious practitioners.

Smith’s religious marketplace considered the incentives experienced by two groups. The first—which economists would refer to as the ‘demand side’ of the market—were the general public, whose interest was in obtaining the most benefit from the religious services they consumed. The second—the ‘supply side’—were the religious organizations which provided those services, whose interest was in earning a living, either by attracting adherents and their associated tithes or by achieving sponsorship from the state.

In this model, Smith asserted that a free religious market with many small sects was ideal for all parties involved. Practitioners would have many religious options from which to choose, and would be free to select the sect which returned them the most spiritual benefit, and the sects themselves would see an increase in the quality of their religious product as a result of free competition for adherents. Smith suggests that this system is self-perpetuating, since any desire for a certain religious offering which does not yet exist in the market provides an incentive for a new sect to break off from one of the old, thereby keeping the size of each individual sect relatively small.

An associated benefit of this arrangement is that, though individual sects may become fanatic or exhibit “excessive zeal” for particular tenets, they would each be too small to achieve any substantially harmful effect, and may even drive other sects toward moderation.

Unfortunately, though there are an estimated 200 Christian denominations alone in the United States, we do not live in a nation whose religious landscape is dominated by small, independent, moderate, and adaptable sects. In fact, 70 million Americans belong to just one sect in particular: the Catholic Church.

And, despite the Constitution’s very first Amendment explicitly prohibiting the establishment of a national religion, more than **four in ten** Americans favor declaring the United States a “Christian Nation.”

But while Christian nationalism presents growing concerns for the future of American democracy and has troubling ties to white supremacist and fascist organizations, all modern research suggests it is also a self-defeating enterprise. Several modern extensions of Adam Smith’s work on the economics

of religion have focused on the effects of state sponsorship of religion on both public religiosity and the state itself, and their findings confirm what Supreme Court Justice **Hugo Black** asserted in 1962: “A union of government and religion tends to destroy government and degrade religion.”

In their **2004 paper** “Religious Freedom and the Unintended Consequences of State Religion,” **Charles M. North** and **Carl R. Gwin** suggest that state sponsorship of religion results in a decline in public religiosity. Their economic argument is actually quite simple, and goes something like this:

Suppose that all individuals in a society have a certain amount of time per week, which they can choose to allocate between work, non-religious leisure activities, and attending religious services. Each of these activities has a benefit: work earns income, non-religious leisure is enjoyable, and attending religious services returns some spiritual benefit. And while each additional hour of work results in the same additional income, non-religious leisure and religious attendance both experience what economists call “diminishing marginal returns”; that is, each additional hour of non-religious leisure and religious attendance is worth less to an individual. This intuitively makes sense—having one day off work as opposed to zero feels like a far greater improvement than having four days off as opposed to three.

Individuals will naturally choose to participate in whichever activity returns them the most benefit. For example, nearly everyone finds it worthwhile to—rather than working every waking moment—sacrifice at least an hour of work each week to make time for leisure, since the value an individual places on that first hour of leisure is greater than the income associated with an additional hour of work. Since each additional hour of leisure becomes less valuable, though, there will be some amount of leisure for which the value of an additional hour is less than the income from an additional hour of work; at this point the individual will stop consuming more leisure, and has reached an equilibrium between work and time off.

The same is true when we include the additional category of religious attendance: for each individual, there is some point at which the value of an additional hour of work, leisure, and religious attendance are all equal, and individuals will naturally adjust how they allocate their time until they reach this equilibrium point.

Imagine, then, that our individuals live in a country with many relatively small religious groups.

Christian Nationalists cont. pg 4

**Christian Nationalists
cont. from pg 3**

Clearly, each person will choose the religion which returns them the most benefit amongst their many available options, and will then attend church until the value of an additional hour of religious attendance is equal to the value of an additional hour of work.

But suppose that now some religious nationalist movement succeeds in establishing an official state religion, which comes to dominate the religious marketplace and crowd out other sects. Then, unless an individual already happens to be a member of this state religion, they must now switch to a religion which offers them less benefit than the one they were a part of before. As a result, the point at which the value of an additional hour of religious attendance dips below the value of an additional hour of work will arrive sooner—and our individual will go to church less. If our individual finds this new state religion so much less beneficial than his or her previous one that the value of the first hour of attendance is less than the value of an hour of work, then he or she will not go to church at all.

The inverse argument is true as well; if small religious sects are in competition, and the quality of their religious products increases as a result, then individuals will see greater benefit from these religious groups and will spend more time on

religious practice.

North and Gwin find that the data support this relationship: over 59 countries, the presence of a state religion reduced the number of people who attended religious services at least once a week by about 16% of the population.

Aside from resulting in fewer choices for religious consumers, even the apparent benefits of state sponsorship can damage a religious institution. Adam Smith himself, in 1776, wrote that: *“The teachers of new religions have always had a considerable advantage in attacking those ancient and established systems of which the clergy, reposing themselves upon their benefices, had neglected to keep up the fervor of faith and devotion in the great body of the people; and having given themselves up to indolence, were become altogether incapable of making any vigorous exertion in defense even of their own establishment.”* By receiving financial sponsorship from the state, Smith argues, the clergy of an established church no longer rely on voluntary contributions from adherents, and so become complacent and vulnerable to criticism.

North and Gwin point to evidence of this as well, in a previous **1997 paper** from Iannaccone, Finke, and Stark examining rates of religious service attendance amongst non-established churches in countries with state religions. In Sweden, for example, where only 5% of people attended religious services at least once a week, weekly attendance amongst smaller denominations such as the Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Seventh-Day Adventists, and others was actually around 70%. The established Church of Sweden, meanwhile, has high rates of membership but very low rates of attendance. The same was true in England, where non-Anglican denominations saw much higher rates of attendance than the established and dominant Church of England.

And while these state-sponsored churches correlate with lower religiosity in their home countries, America’s religious “free market” has resulted in

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some of the highest rates of religious participation in the world. This is startlingly apparent in [this graph](#) from Pew Research Center, in which the United States is the lone major outlier to buck the trend of higher per-capita GDP correlating strongly with lower rates of prayer. In fact, roughly three times as many Americans report praying daily as would be expected given GDP.

As North and Gwin note, this may in part be the result of the “aggressively secularist” stance of the Supreme Court” increasing demand for religious services. While, for example, Christian nationalists today surely disapprove of the Supreme Court’s decision to declare officially sponsored prayer in schools unconstitutional (*Engel v. Vitale*, 1962), **President John F. Kennedy said of the ruling** at the time: “*We have in this case a very easy remedy, and that is to pray ourselves. [...] We can pray a good deal more at home, [and] we can attend our churches with a great deal more fidelity.*” The chart above indicates that Americans heeded Kennedy’s advice; when religion is removed from public life, it seems, it is able to flourish privately.

This should be a cautionary tale for Christian nationalists—declaring the United States a “Christian Nation” or establishing Christianity as a state church may seem like great victories for faith, but may ultimately reduce Americans’ uniquely high level of religiosity.

It is a cautionary tale for the rest of us as well, though. As mentioned earlier, Adam Smith argued that a free religious marketplace is better for both religious organizations and their followers. But more modern research has found one institution that would benefit from a state-sponsored church: an autocratic leader.

Metin Cosgel and Thomas J. Miceli (2009) developed an economic model of church-state separation which considered a variety of governments and religious marketplaces. In a democratic state with a competitive market for religion, they find that it is always in the interest of both the church and state for religion to remain independent. This is true also when an autocrat is in power—provided that the church has no legitimizing effect on the state. However, if the church has a sufficiently great legitimizing effect on an autocratic regime—if, for example, a Christian nationalist were to rise to power and a growth in Christianity would help

legitimize his or her administration—it is in the interest of such a leader to bring religion under state control.

This problem is compounded by Cosgel and Miceli’s finding that when the market for religion is monopolized, the likelihood of the church being brought under state control increases.

It should be apparent, then, that Christian nationalism benefits no one—not Christians, not the church, and certainly not everyone else. In declaring the United States a Christian nation, and naming Christianity its national religion, Christian nationalists may inadvertently decrease Americans’ religiosity in general and decrease attendance at Christian churches in particular. If the United States were to financially subsidize this national religion, it would likely lead to further dips in attendance and (according to Cosgel and Miceli) a decrease in the taxes the government is able to collect. And if as a result of this state sponsorship Christianity was able to develop a monopoly in the market for religion, it would not only open the door for the legitimization of an autocrat, but also increase the likelihood of the church being forced under state control—which I have no doubt it would prefer to avoid.

Do I believe this logic will convince the self-proclaimed Christian nationalists who stormed the Capitol on January 6th, who sit in Congress, and who are currently running for governorships and Congressional seats across the country? No, of course not. But I do hope that reasonable Christians, who have been shifting into the ‘Christian nationalist’ camp in ever-greater numbers, will come to realize that imposing their religious beliefs on everyone else (especially by means of the state) would do them no favors.

Fortunately, it seems that voters in some parts of the country have decided to reject Christian nationalist messaging. In Pennsylvania, which is more religious than the national average, polls showed gubernatorial candidate **Doug Mastriano** (“*Separation of church and state’—anyone who says that, show me in the Constitution*

where it says it. It’s not there. It’s never been there.”) behind by ten points or more. And a surprising poll released in October had Colorado Rep. **Lauren Boebert** (“*I’m tired of this separation of church and state junk.*”) only two points ahead of her Democratic opponent.

But there are still many such candidates in no electoral danger as of this writing; Georgia Rep. **Marjory Taylor Greene** (“*I’m a Christian, and I say it proudly— we should be Christian nationalists.*”) was at time of this writing **projected** to win reelection by more than 45 points. Representing a deep red, deeply religious district, Greene will continue to win reelection until reasonable Christian voters recognize that she is only damaging their shared faith.

Until that happens, though, we can at least attempt to drown out those few Christian nationalists in Congress with more rational voices. To see where your House member falls on secular issues and church-state separation, take a look at our **2022 House Voter Scorecard**.

Note: This is part of the irregular series “From the Intern Desk,” in which college interns for the Secular Coalition for America produce topical editorials on the issues that impact our daily lives. This piece was contributed by Jake Simon.

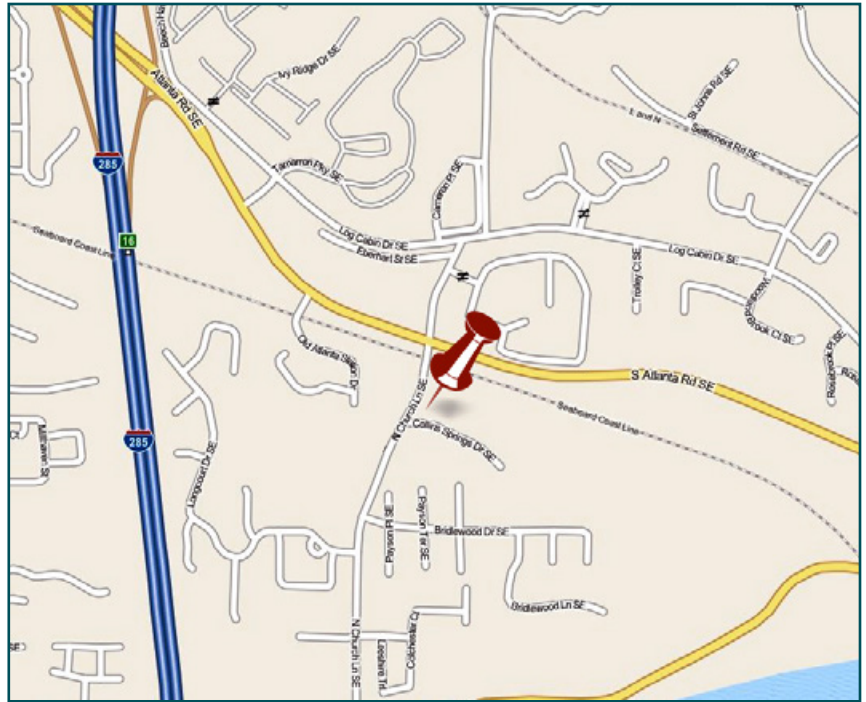


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**Valerie Tarico
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