

Johno (Jonathan MS) Pearce: “Jesus, Lord, at Thy Birth?” (Or, “The Nativity: A Critical Examination”) (via Zoom)

The nativity of Jesus carries much cultural recognition, but does the Biblical narrative command much support in the academic world? Is it a story which holds much historical truth, or were the



Johno Pearce

Biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus simply an opportunity for the authors to impart their theological beliefs?

In this presentation, teacher, author, blogger and philosopher, Jonathan M.S. Pearce will be setting out the

main problems with the historical reliability of the two infancy narratives, and building a cumulative case for objecting to the historicity of the Gospel’s nativity accounts.

Jonathan is a teacher and author from South Hampshire, UK, who has dedicated many years of his life to all manner of things philosophical and theological. He is currently studying for a Masters in Philosophy, and is a founding member of the Tipling Philosophers, a friendly group of disparate believers and non-believers based in Hampshire. *The Nativity: A Critical Examination* is his fourth book, and follows *Free Will? An Investigation Into Whether We Have Free Will, or Whether I Was Always Going to Write This Book*, a popular philosophy, science and theology book looking into the age-old free will vs. determinism debate. He has also written *The Little Book of Unholy Questions*, which looks to show the incoherence of the idea of an all-loving, all-knowing and all-powerful God. As an interlude from writing about philosophy and theology, he has branched out by writing a book of advice for dads of twins, naturally called *Twins: A Survival Guide for Dads*. He is a founding author for the Skeptic Ink Network (SIN), an online community of skeptic writers, bloggers, academics, thinkers and activists. Check out his blog at

<http://skeptickink.com/tipling/>. Their facebook page can be found at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Skeptic-Ink>

Steve Yothment again has set up a free Zoom session for Sunday, December 13 from 1:00-2:30 p.m. Log in at 12:30 to socialize and everyone is welcome to hang out and chat afterwards. Below is the meeting invitation as generated by Zoom. Log in with a computer, tablet, or smart phone.

AFS December Meeting

December 13, 2020 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

To join Zoom meeting go to link below:
us02web.zoom.us/j/86843137944

Do you celebrate Christmas even though you're an atheist?



Calendar

Jan 10	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Feb 14	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm

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

We hate you Covid-19!

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 unless otherwise noted. Programs start at 1:00 PM, but feel free to arrive at 12:00 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.



December 13: John Pearce of the United Kingdom will be joining us with a talk on the Nativity

January 10: TBA

February 14: TBA

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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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Atlanta Freethought News An AFS Publication

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Atlanta Freethought News

Vol. 26, Number 12, December 2020 CE
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Book Review: *What's the Matter With Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*

Thomas Frank • Metropolitan Books, New York, 2004

Many American voters consistently vote against their own best interests. Right here in Georgia, rural counties overwhelmingly supported **Brian Kemp** for governor in 2018. He has since presided over two rural hospital closures, marking nine such closures under Republican governors since 2010. In spite of this, he has refused federal funding for supplemental medicare coverage and lowered the taxes which support those hospitals. Most of the Georgia folks who voted for **Nathan Deal** in 2010 and 2014 and then Brian Kemp in 2018 have seen their lives get measurably worse over each election cycle. This trend is not just local either. American rural lifespan has actually declined, driven by premature deaths from lack of medical care, suicide, and addiction. These folks have voted state and local politicians, congressmen, and even presidents into power. Those leaders then advance the very policies which are killing and impoverishing rural voters.

Thomas Frank's *What's the Matter with Kansas* (Metropolitan Books, New York, 2004) is a witty, interesting, and perhaps even correct exploration of this phenomenon, accomplished through a close reading of Kansas history and politics as of 2004. Little appears to have changed in the sixteen years since the book was written (although a Democrat was elected in Kansas in 2018 after the catastrophic tenure of **Sam Brownback**).

The thesis of the book is that Kansas voters are the victims of a kind of political sleight of hand. Arch-conservative politicians distract voters with cultural issues like abortion, school prayer, and the alleged general coarsening of the media. They claim that these are all controlled by a shadowy cabal of liberal conspirators, who wish nothing but ill to good salt-of-the-earth folks. Meanwhile, those politicians serve the interests of the very real corporations and plutocrats who fund them. Those corporations have no interest in whether evolution is taught in secondary schools, or how much nudity is on late-night TV. Rather, they're interested in lower taxes and less regulation, which those politicians are now in a position to grant—everyone, except of course for the voters. Since the voters are by and large not fabulously wealthy, taxation issues which concern plutocrats don't affect them. But when antitrust laws stop being enforced, or government spending on schools and hospitals

is curtailed, or air and water pollution gets worse, the consequences are real.

Frank explores these issues with wit and well-researched facts—the book has substantive footnotes, so you'll have to read it with two bookmarks. The wit is genuine. Here's a paragraph from the start of the book:

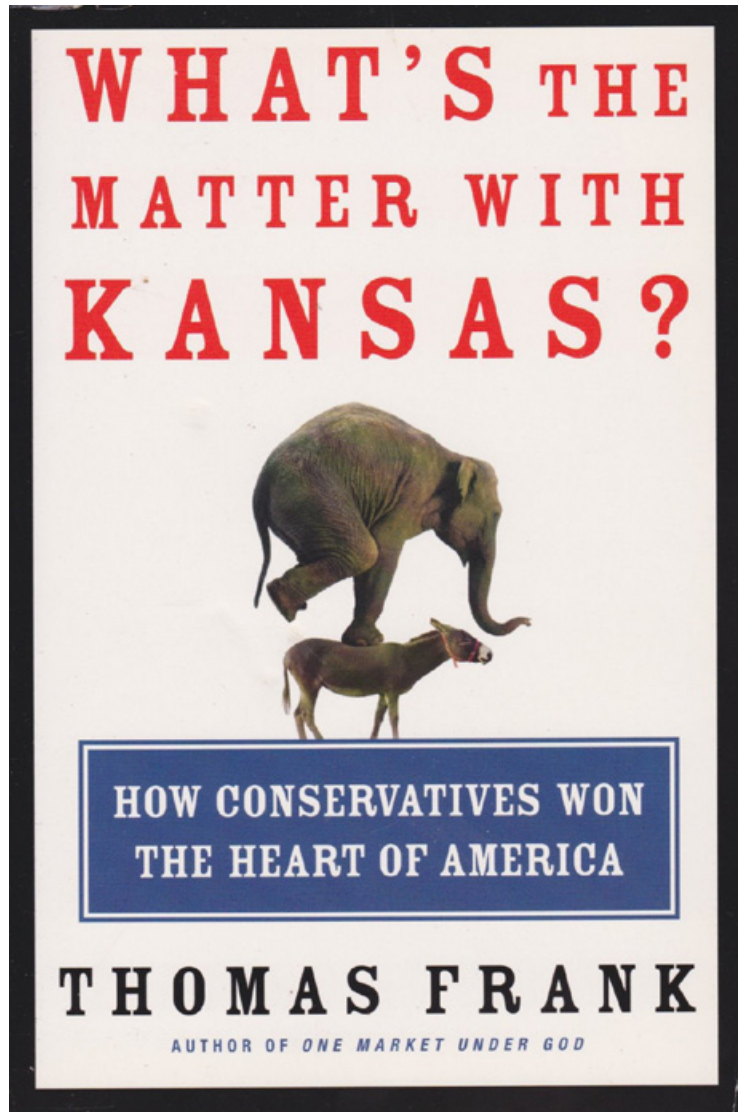
If you earn over \$300,000 a year, you owe a great deal to this arrangement. Raise a glass sometime to those indigent High Plains Republicans as you contemplate your good fortune: It is thanks to their self-denying votes that you are no longer burdened by the estate tax, or troublesome labor unions, or meddling banking regulators. Thanks to the allegiance of these sons and daughters of toil, you have escaped what your affluent forebears used to call "confiscatory" income tax levels. It is thanks to them that you were able to buy two Rolexes this year instead of one and get that Segway with the special gold trim.

He has done his research as well. The book benefits from personal interviews with voters as well as politicians. It delves into Kansas history in some depth to explain how a state full of leftists as recently as the 1930s has come so far the other way now. Frank has also read widely in conservative literature. His

analysis of the "...what we will call the 'plen-T-plaint', a curious amassing of petty, unrelated beefs with the world." is especially trenchant.

This book is an enjoyable read about a curious (and scary) political phenomenon. It doesn't say much about how to address these goings-on, but that's a subject for a different book.

~Charles Shapiro



Trump Administration Must Disclose Full Details of \$7.3 Billion Church Bailout, Federal Court Rules

atheists.org

On November 5th, American Atheists, a church/state watchdog organization, praised the **United States District Court for the District of Columbia's ruling that the Trump Administration must disclose the full details** of the Small Business Administration (SBA)'s Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) forgivable loan recipients. This program includes approximately **\$7.3 billion used to bail out churches.**

"This is an important victory for government accountability and church/state separation," said **Alison Gill**, Vice President for Legal and Policy at American Atheists. "Americans will learn exactly how much of their tax dollars were used to unconstitutionally support the religious activities of churches."

In July, the Trump Administration **released incomplete data** in response to multiple Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, **including American Atheists' from June 16.** The Trump Administration's decision to only release broad ranges of loan amounts for recipients, including houses of worship, receiving more than \$150,000 and to not



release the names of recipients receiving less than \$150,000 prevented full transparency.

"Once these documents are made available, we will scour them and find out why the Trump Administration wanted to hide the details of this church bailout from taxpayers. Our investigation continues," said Gill.

"This is a win for religious equality and accountability. But it's just the first step. The Trump Administration has **allowed religious entities, including Catholic churches, to ignore PPP rules**, fire workers, and still get their loans forgiven," said **Nick Fish**, president of American Atheists. "There are still massive flaws in this program that have allowed churches to skirt the rules and ignore the basic requirements of the program—to say

nothing of the fact that this multi-billion dollar giveaway to religious worship should never have happened in the first place."

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By Backing Election Conspiracy Theories, Christian Nationalists Have Sided With Trump Over America

By Rob Boston / Wall of Separation Blog

au.org

When the history of these times is written, many individuals and groups will have much to answer for because they aided and abetted President Donald Trump's increasingly unhinged conspiracy theories about the results of the election – which, as any sensible person knows, he lost.

We've come to a point where Trump and his enablers have implicated the following in a sweeping conspiracy: hundreds of state and local officials, including several GOP governors; state judges and federal judges (including federal appointees put on the bench by Trump); companies that make voting software; people who counted the votes; a dead Venezuelan president; the FBI; the U.S. Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Department of Justice (including Attorney General William Barr); the media and a host of others.

All apparently joined forces in a massive conspiracy to deny Trump a second term.

The motivation for some of these actors remains murky, but that no longer matters to the people barreling through the fever swamps on Trump's crazy train. Have no doubt that leaders of Religious Right groups are sitting in the first car.

Among them is Mathew Staver, chairman of the Liberty Counsel, a Religious Right legal group. Staver issued an email fund-raising appeal recently with the tagline "Where there's smoke, there's fire..." The "smoke" in this case consisted of the same vague stories and unsubstantiated claims that Trump began circulating shortly after it became apparent that he had lost the election.

"More election fraud incident reports are being reported," Staver blared. He went on to add that a "retired three-star U.S. Air Force Lt. General is claiming he has firsthand knowledge of computer software being used to tamper with election results."

The anonymous general could just as easily claim that he observed space aliens descend from a flying saucer and do the foxtrot behind a 7-Eleven. Shocking story – but where's his proof? There's

an old saying that extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence. In this case, I'd settle for regular old evidence, but Staver doesn't even have that – he just has more wild tales. (Staver's far from the only one peddling this nonsense. For more examples of Christian nationalists backing Trump's claims, see history professor Jon Fea's blog.)

The conspiracy theory being pushed by Trump and his allies is far from harmless. It undermines our democracy, and it puts lives at risk. Consider Christopher Krebs, former head of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, who became a target for right-wing wrath after he debunked Trump's baseless charges of widespread election fraud.

Krebs, whose agency worked with state and local officials to ensure the election was safe from hackers, issued a statement through CISA reading, "The November 3rd election was the most secure in American history. There is no evidence that any voting system deleted or lost votes, changed votes, or was in any way compromised."



For his trouble, Krebs got fired via a tweet (of course) and is now dealing with threats. One of the most appalling came from Trump attorney Joe DiGenova, who, during an appearance on a conservative radio show, called Krebs "a class A moron" who should be "drawn and quartered, taken out at dawn and shot."

The allegedly "moral" forces of the Religious Right have cast their lot with such people. It didn't have to be this way. In the wake of the election, Christian nationalist groups faced a choice: They could stand with Trump and

his marauding gang who are intent on tearing down American democracy for the sake of one man's ego, or they could side with the truth (as unpalatable as it may be to them).

To no one's surprise, they chose Trump over America. And with that fateful move, they also made a series of other choices: They chose to trash the foundational principle of one person, one vote. They chose to oppose our system of selecting leaders through fair, democratic elections – and maturely accepting the results. They chose to stand for invective, lies and threats over rational discourse.

Staver and his cronies may claim to be patriots but make no mistake, everything they are saying and doing runs counter to what this country is about. But like their hero Trump, they long ago lost the ability to feel shame and simply don't care.

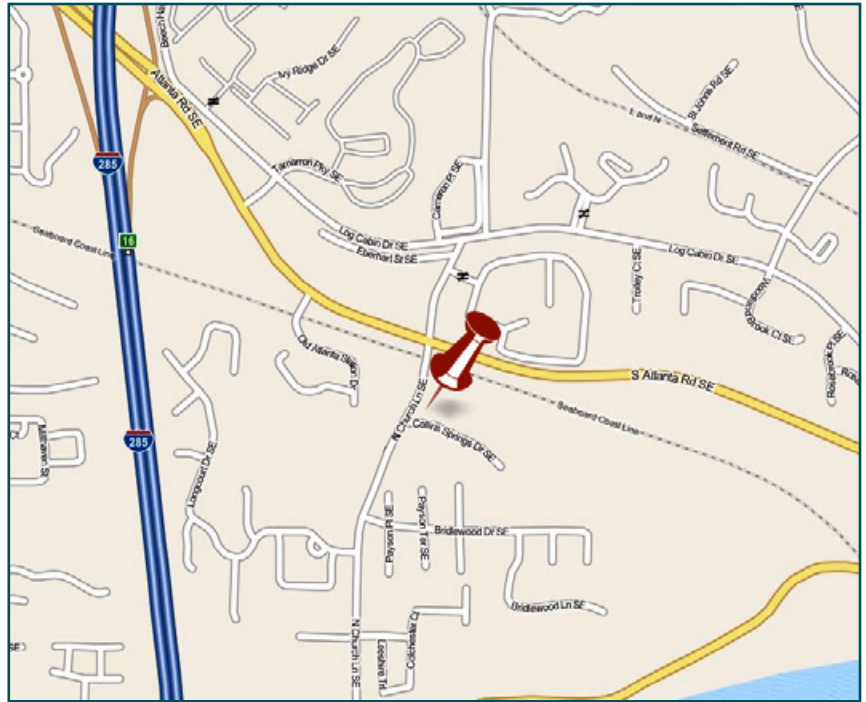
All of us who do care, however, have an obligation – indeed a duty – to call out their behavior for what it is: a disgrace to American values.

*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



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

**Jonathan Pearce
12/13/20 1:00 pm EST
(via Zoom)**



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