

Kristina Lee - "In God We Trust": How Christian Nationalists use Theistnormative Legislation to Advance their Agenda

On Sunday, December 12, at 1:00 pm via Zoom, AFS will welcome another nationally renowned speaker for our Zoom meeting for November, **Kristina Lee**, a rising star in the field of church-state relations, both as a scholar and as an activist. Lee, a serious scholar with a growing reputation and an activist of great importance, is a doctoral student (all but dissertation complete) at Colorado State University. She studies the intersection of religious and political rhetoric, with a particular interest in issues relating to Christian nationalism, atheism, theistnormativity, and religious marginalization.



Kristina Lee

For this talk, Lee noted, "In the United States, citizens are often portrayed by leaders as being believers in a higher power. This theistnormative narrative works to associate the belief in a God with good citizenship while simultaneously framing atheists as un-American. Throughout U.S. history, Christian nationalists have played a key role in passing legislation that has been and continues to be used to enforce this narrative while also helping to advance their agenda of establishing the United States as a 'Christian nation.' The most pervasive example of such theistnormative legislation is the national motto 'In God We Trust.' This presentation explores the history of how and why Christian nationalists worked to get the theistnormative motto on coins during the Civil War and helped to make it the national motto in the 1950s. Today, Christian nationalists are working to pass 'In God We Trust' bills to help further their agenda and it is imperative that the secular community take these bills seriously."

We're proud to provide our members and visitors with great programs, and this will be another great and appropriate program. We often have speakers with a true national reputation, as this time will be. We're delighted."

The Lee program, free and open to the public, will be preceded by a few minutes of social distanced socializing starting about 12:30 P.M., for any interested. The program will start at about 1 P.M. (ET in US) on Sunday, 12 December, via Zoom. We welcome those who are not freethinkers but who just want to know more about the state of the law, history, and the separation of religion and government from the perspective of an accomplished scholar. All freethinkers are of course welcome—and we hope that they will decide to join as members in due course.

AFS December Meeting Dec 12, 2021 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)

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

Calendar

Dec 12	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Jan 9	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm
Feb 13	General Meeting on Zoom	1 pm

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

Scientists photograph God for first time ever!



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.



December 12: Kristina Lee

January 9: Chris McDougal

February 13: TBA

March 13: Timothy Binga

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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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'Love thy neighbor' a complicated mandate for an atheist

By Ed Buckner

Galveston County Texas - *The Daily News* 11/11/21

Virtually all the world's cultures have a version of the golden rule, easily derived with or without any references to the supernatural. For Christians, the usual expression of this, from Matthew 7:12, is "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you." A closely related idea from Christian teachings, summed up in Mark 12:31, is to "Love your neighbor as yourself."



Ed Buckner

Deceptively simple, these ideas incorporate more complexity than a first reading might suggest. I'm no Christian nor any kind of expert on Christian understandings of these ideas and related ideas like forgiveness. The most impressive expression I ever heard of this Christian perspective came from then-President **Barack Obama** on June 18, 2015, after the murder of nine members of a church in Charleston, South Carolina. Obama's a cappella rendition of "Amazing Grace," a hymn I love the sound and dislike the words of, included in the full 37- or 38-minute speech, was incredible. A good written Christian source is **Randal**

Rausser's 2015 book, *Is the Atheist My Neighbor?*

Christians I admire greatly — **John Lewis**; my neighbors, who are politically conservative and devout Christians and the best neighbors you could ask for; **Dietrich Bonhoeffer**; some kin; and others — practice loving their neighbors (literal or figurative neighbors) well. Some non-Christians I have little use for, including another neighbor who's probably an atheist, are beyond my ability to love.

Self-proclaimed atheist **Joseph Stalin** and self-proclaimed **Christian Adolf Hitler** deserved no love from anyone. And who knows whether **Dylann Roof**, the murderer of those nine people in Charleston in 2015, was a Christian or whether **Dimitrios Pagourtzis** of Santa Fe is really an atheist? I cannot love or forgive them, whatever I should do.

But what must a nonbeliever do in general? Because I don't think there's a God or that anyone died for my sins, must I still love my neighbor? What if that neighbor plays loud music at 3 a.m. or cusses me out if I walk on his lawn? What if she hates me because I don't like her aggressive dog? Can I hate the "sin" but love the sinner? Isn't everyone better off if I adopt the idea I saw on a Quaker bumper sticker: "Love Thy Neighbor — No Exceptions"?

Human beings all across Galveston County and where I live in Atlanta, religious and irreligious alike, are as varied in lovability as anyone can imagine. Do they deserve to be loved by their neighbors?

My answer is "yes" — if by that is meant that the default is to love them and to treat them the way I want to be treated. If a neighbor's music is too loud, she deserves to be asked, cordially, to turn it down. If it gets louder instead, maybe it's time to call the law — lovingly, of course.

And, I'm firmly convinced, no neighbor near or far deserves to be hated because of his beliefs, opinions, religion, irreligion or politics. Forgiven or respected? Possibly not.

Loved? Yes, at least for openers.

Ed Buckner is a native of League City now living in Atlanta, Georgia.

Conservative Evangelicals Still In Denial Over COVID Pandemic

au.org

Rob Boston - Wall of Separation Blog

As of December 7th, more than 785,000 Americans have died from COVID-19. To put that number into perspective, consider that about 620,000 men died in combat during the Civil War, and there were more than 405,000 U.S. battlefield deaths during World War II.

This is a serious virus, and we're not done with it yet. A new variant, **omicron**, has surfaced in several nations including the U.S., and doctors aren't sure yet how serious it will be or how rapidly it will spread.

Yet despite this sobering picture, white conservative evangelicals continue to live in a state of denial. Nearly two years since the virus was first detected and despite the alarming death toll, many pastors and self-proclaimed prophets are still telling their flocks to avoid vaccines and are promoting conspiracy theories.

In late November, **Marcus Lamb**, CEO of Daystar Television Network, the nation's second-largest Christian network, **died of COVID**. Lamb used his network as a forum for anti-vaccine conspiracy theorists. Shows on the network also promoted the use of hydroxychloroquine, which studies show is ineffective against the virus.

While hosting one program, Lamb urged his viewers to do their own research instead of listening to experts. Daystar gave a platform to various cranks and crackpots, including America's Frontline Doctors, a fringe anti-vaccination group. Even now, Daystar's website **sells an eight-part DVD series** titled "Vaccines: The Unauthorized Truth." Its description reads, "The truth behind these pills and injections along with the police-state protections they enjoy may be one of the most shocking revelations of the modern era." Daystar's site remains **littered with other anti-vaccine nonsense**.

After Lamb fell ill with the virus in November, his family members blamed the sickness on Satan.

"There's no doubt in my mind that this is a spiritual attack from the enemy," Lamb's son, **Jonathan**, said on the air Nov. 23. "As much as my parents have gone on here to kind of inform everyone about everything going on to the pandemic and some of the ways to treat COVID — there's no doubt that the enemy is not happy about that.

Lamb continued on page 4

Lamb continued from page 3

And he's doing everything he can to take down my Dad."

Some people might be tempted to shrug, saying Lamb got what he deserved. But this isn't about Lamb or even one network that chose to operate as a font of misinformation. It's about an entire right-wing evangelical subculture that has turned its back on science and embraced irrationality – mainly for political reasons. (Although it is difficult to "own the libs" when you are dead.)

And it's about the fact that no one – not even their coreligionists – will call them to account. After Lamb's death, *Washington Post* religion reporter **Michelle Boorstein** noted that the evangelical leaders who mourned his passing didn't bother to point out that his death at age 64 was entirely preventable.

"Absent was a painful truth: Lamb had led his global Christian network, Daystar, for months in spreading inaccurate information about coronavirus vaccines and instead promoted treatments that are not proven remedies," **Boorstein** wrote.

Elsewhere in the article she added, "But the silence and unanswered

questions by some Christian leaders, as well as Lamb's family and network, sit atop what some experts say is a deep base of politics, conspiratorial thinking and a skepticism of anything that appears secular. And that makes frank discussion of Daystar's activism against vaccines, even in the face of death, unlikely."

This same toxic mix of far-right politics and conspiracy theories led conservative evangelicals to insist that their churches should be able to operate during stay-at-home orders. It led them to decline vaccines at **higher rates than everyone else**. It leads them now to go about their daily businesses unvaxxed, unmasked and unfazed by facts,

putting all around them at risk.

Apparently, not even the death of one of their own can shake their consciences. One wonders what, exactly, it will take?



Marcus Lamb

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On The Road Again: A Cross-Country Drive Takes On Symbolic Meaning

au.org

By Rachel Laser - Wall of Separation Blog

Editor's Note: This post by Americans United President and CEO Rachel Laser originally appeared in the December 2021 issue of AU's Church & State magazine. To subscribe and get Church & State delivered to your door every month, become a member of AU.

Twenty-five years ago, I tied the knot with my wonderful husband **Mark**. For our honeymoon, we hiked the Grand Canyon and then spent a little time in Santa Fe, N.M., enchanted by the desert and mountains and inspired by the work of artists like **Georgia O'Keefe**.

Since AU is still working virtually, Mark and I decided to road trip across the country with our dog, Teddy, and come back to Santa Fe for a 25th anniversary "workcation."

During our drive through the South, we passed several large crosses and countless billboards inviting a text or call to find Jesus. After 28 hours on the road, we finally arrived in Santa Fe to a Christian band playing in the town square. (Not a legal

problem as long as it's public land that all groups – religious and non-religious – have a right to use.)

Next, it was time to see the house we rented. It is lovely, but it turned out to have multiple crosses on multiple walls. I tried to add yellow stickies with crude drawings of a variety of other religious symbols, but sadly they soon fell down. At first, I took the crosses down for my Zoom calls, but now I just leave them up and use my background to teach about what church-state separation doesn't reach (private rental homes or private land) and to highlight what it's like to be a religious minority in America.

I feel conflicted about criticizing private religious symbols and displays that are part of places intended to be shared with the public. On the one hand, the "Jesus saves" signs are instruments of proselytism, which groups have every right to do if it's on private land and privately funded.

On the other hand, those in the religious majority should make an effort to be more inclusive. That starts by not assuming that everyone is Christian. So, for example, if you are renting your home to tourists who inevitably come from a variety of belief systems, try harder to decorate accordingly.

When it comes to government displaying preferred religious symbols on public property, however, that's just wrong and a violation of the separation of church and state. It seems so obvious to me, but we are facing more of a battle on this than I wish we were.

Remember in 2019 when the Supreme Court decided that the government could keep and maintain a 40-foot towering cross on public land in Bladensburg, Md.? Justice **Samuel A. Alito** audaciously claimed that the cross has taken on a secular meaning. Never for this Jew – nor, I imagine, for others who are religious minorities or nonreligious! As Justice **Ruth Bader Ginsburg** said in her dissent: "To non-Christians ... the State's choice to display

the cross on public buildings or spaces conveys a message of exclusion: It tells them they 'are outsiders, not full members of the political community.'"

Like the Court, public opinion is also not where it should be. A recent Pew Research Center poll shows that 39% of respondents said they believe cities and towns should be allowed to display religious symbols on public property. Just



35% oppose this and the rest (26%) have no opinion.

What does this all mean for AU's work? Our lawyers will continue to send letters in response to your complaints about government symbols and displays when we believe they represent a constitutional violation. (Sometimes we can resolve the matter without going to court.) At the same time, we will focus our legal resources where we can either best win or mitigate loss and where we can stop concrete harm to people.

AU will also relentlessly build allies, because we know most people are on our side. That same Pew poll demonstrated that most Americans — even in red states — support church-state separation, and, importantly, reject the central tenets of Christian nationalism, such as the idea that the Constitution was inspired by God or that the federal government should advocate Christian values.

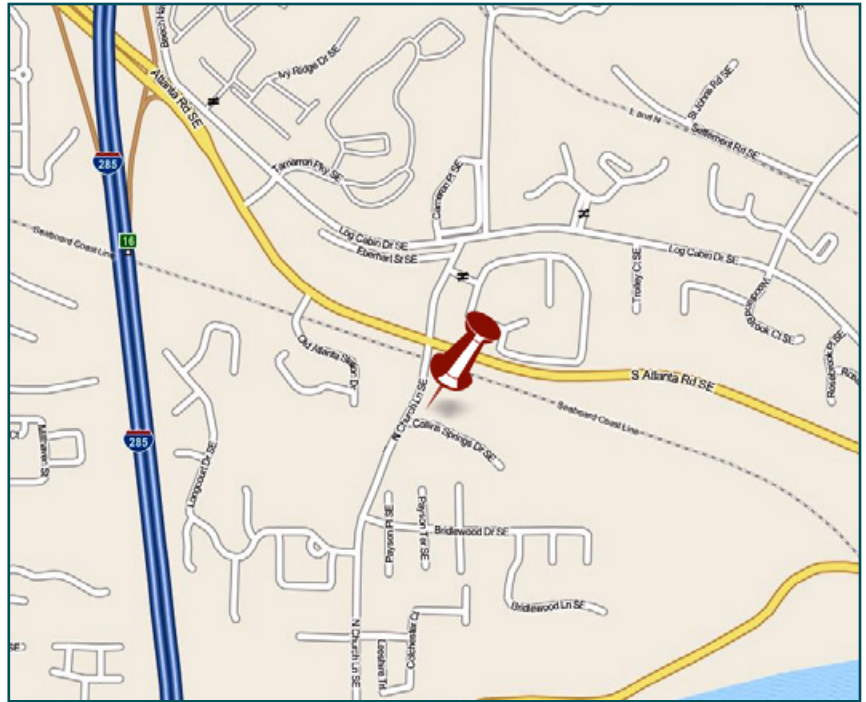
On our drive back to D.C., I'm going to try a new exercise. Every time I see a symbol or sign that represents just one religious viewpoint, I'm going to pause and think of you all and your dedication to making America a country that makes good on its promise of religious freedom. In the long run, one step – or mile – at a time, we're going to succeed.

*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



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

**Kristina Lee
12/12/21 1:00 pm EST
(via Zoom)**



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