

Ain't Got Nobody 2023, Begone!

AFS will have no speaker program on 10 December. But we do plan to enjoy the day and each other's company.

We're proud to have had interesting and thought-provoking talks all year long, but we're skipping that this Sunday.

We will instead get together and enlighten and encourage each other informally and warmly. We won't have a formal potluck, but everyone is encouraged to bring his or her favorite holiday treat.

The AFS Board will meet at 11 a.m. and election results will be announced at the beginning of the festivities. The election is important, as we're going to see some leadership changes in the coming months. Diane Buckner is retiring as board member/treasurer, and Ed Buckner is stepping aside as chair of the speaker/program committee. (Both have promised to remain active AFS members.)

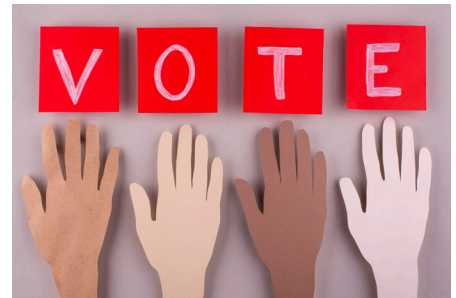
The December non-program gathering, free and open to the public, will start about noon or 12:30 P.M. Eastern Standard Time in the US, for any interested. We welcome those who are not freethinkers but who just want to know more about freethought, secular humanism, and church & state. All freethinkers are of course welcome—and we hope that they will decide to join as members in due course.

Calendar

Dec 10	Board Meeting Live/Online	11 am
Dec 10	Group Social (Live)	1 pm
Jan 14	Potluck lunch	11:30 am
Jan 14	General Meeting (Live/Online)	1 pm

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

If you're a paid member and haven't yet voted for the 2024 AFS Board yet, please:



**AFS December 10 Meeting
Dec 10, 2023 1:00-2:30 PM (EST)**

No Zoom meeting this month!
Meet 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.



- 10 Dec** No speaker — social gathering only
14 Jan Leonard Presberg - Association of Secular Elected Officials
11 Feb Antonio Daza
10 Mar TBA
14 Apr TBA

AFS Email List

The AFS Announcements email list provides subscribers with reminders and updates on AFS activities. Send an email to AFS-Announce-subscribe@yahoogroups.com to subscribe. The AFS Forum email list is a place for discussions of freethought, atheism, agnosticism, church-state separation and religion. To subscribe to this list, send an email to AFSForum-subscribe@yahoogroups.com. The AFS Facebook page is at facebook.com/AtlantaFreethought. For calendar information on AFS activities, please join the **Meetup group**. The AFS website is www.atlantafreethought.org.

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

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Aren't Atheists Afraid of Death and Dying?

by Ed Buckner • Letters to a Free Country

There are undoubtedly atheists who're afraid of death and of dying and other atheists who face the inexorable end with calm, peaceful understanding. Same for believers. But *if* there's any difference in fear of death based on religious belief, it's likely that atheists are, on average, at least slightly less fearful.

None of us, however religious we may be, can seriously think that this life does not come to an end and that we in one sense or another cease to exist. Any human being who has lived many years has had people around him or her die—likely including people s/he loved, and therefore knows there's no getting around it.

Most atheists I know think speculation on an afterlife is as pointless as speculation on a “beforelife” would be. There's not any real evidence that life exists beyond our natural lives, in either time-direction. And there is also no reasonable basis for fears about it—or hopes about it either—even if it does somehow exist.

I've known personally at least five atheists who committed suicide, and no believers (on quick reflection) who have done so. I'm not sure which of two conclusions, **A** or **B**, about atheists and death is better supported by this:

A) atheists don't fear death because they honestly believe there is nothing there to fear; or **B)** if only atheists believed in God and an afterlife, they wouldn't despair and end their own lives. I don't really think either **A** or **B** are probably true or very well supported.

First, my personal sample of known suicides is unlikely to be representative. Second, the five who I know who ended their own lives did so for, as far as I could tell, quite varied reasons. Third, there's usually just no way to know what a person choosing suicide is thinking or how rational s/he is being.

A related perennial freethought question is the whole supposed notion

that gaining eternal life may just require “wagering” that it might exist—“Pascal's Wager,” as it is commonly called. **I wrote about this specifically back in January**, in my fourth Friday reply to these questions—link to that earlier post, in case you missed it, below.

Another related question is the insulting canard, “Why aren't there any atheists in foxholes?”—a question dealt with as part of **Michael Buckner's essay on whether atheists are unAmerican**. Pat Tillman is a well established example, as Michael pointed out. In short, the answer as to whether there are no atheists in foxholes, whatever you mean by the question, is “there are.”

Including me (damn—I was sure younger AND thinner sixteen years ago)—and not just because I've worn the uniform of my nation, though I have—

Does that mean I'm unafraid only because I lack the will to live or don't care whether I do? Of course not. Nor does it mean I lack any fears related to dying—fear of extended or severe pain; fear of losing my mental abilities, etc.—of course I have some of those.

And I have not ever been given an accurate medical “terminal”/death sentence diagnosis, so can I be sure that if I were, it wouldn't render me a cowering, babbling blob? I suppose I can't be certain, but I sure don't think it's likely. Years ago I had a false alarm serious health scare and didn't buckle or pray—but I was mighty unhappy briefly.

I do fear death of the people I love the most much more than I do my own.



Ed at Lake Hypatia, Alabama, July 2007

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor warned us in 2005 that church-state separation was at risk. We failed to listen.

by Rob Boston • AU.com

Former Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor died December 1st. O'Connor, who was 93, retired from the high court in 2005, where she produced a mixed record on church-state issues.

O'Connor was a solid vote against coercive programs of prayer and worship in public schools, and she was wary of allowing government too much leeway in erecting and displaying religious symbols. She supported reproductive rights and over time grew more supportive of LGBTQ+ rights.



Sandra Day O'Connor

But she failed to see certain forms of taxpayer aid to religion, such as school vouchers, as a church-state violation. As a result, the high court upheld vouchers in 2002, and voucher programs now exist in states across the country, where they drain much-needed resources from public schools and foster taxpayer-funded discrimination and indoctrination.

Limits to funding

O'Connor, however, did recognize that there must be some limits to government funding of religion. In 2007, after retiring from the Supreme Court, she sat by special designation on the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals and heard arguments in an *Americans United-sponsored lawsuit called Americans*

United for Separation of Church and State v. Prison Fellowship Ministries. That case challenged state funding of a fundamentalist Christian program operating in an Iowa prison. The program indoctrinated inmates in evangelical Christianity and discriminated against non-Christians by extending special treatment to inmates who were willing to embrace its religious outlook.

Alex J. Luchenitser, currently AU's interim legal director, argued the case before the panel. The appeals court, including O'Connor, ruled in AU's favor later that year, holding that public funding of the program was unconstitutional.

Near the end of her career on the Supreme Court, O'Connor seemed to realize that church-state separation was at risk. In a case dealing with a government display of the Ten Commandments, she challenged those who sought to undermine that principle, asserting, "Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must therefore answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly?"

Why would we indeed? Our country would be a better place today if the court had heeded O'Connor's warning.

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Thank you for your support! We look forward to your being with us in the coming months!

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Travels in 'red' America: You'll be surprised what can happen when you show up

by Rachel Laser • AU.com

Editor's note: This blog post by AU President and CEO Rachel Laser originally appeared in the December 2023 issue of AU's Church & State magazine.

Last month I traveled to St. Louis, Mo., and Tulsa, Okla., to speak at two events. These are tough areas when it comes to our issue, but I left feeling hopeful and inspired. Let me tell you why.

The inspiration started with my get-together in a St. Louis diner with AU Board of Trustees member the Rev. Brian Kaylor. Brian is a Baptist preacher and president and editor-in-chief of *Word&Way*, a Christian media company based in Missouri.

When I asked Brian (over our eggs and funky French toast sandwich) how he became such a champion of church-state separation, he explained that he first came to it from the perspective of protecting religion from government intervention — along the lines of Roger Williams' famous quote: "Forced worship stinks in God's nostrils." I told Brian I was primarily drawn to our issue to make America more inclusive. Brian and I talked about how low the odds were that a Millennial Baptist preacher from Missouri and a Gen X Jew from Chicago would have ended up having lunch together. Church-state separation brought us together!

St. Louis: 75 years of activism

I was in St. Louis to keynote the celebration of AU's St. Louis Chapter's 75th anniversary. In the lovely venue of the Missouri History Museum, I spoke to 100 people from many walks of life, including chapter leaders and activists, faith leaders and groups (including a number of clergy who are plaintiffs in our abortion-ban lawsuit), our local counsel for the lawsuit, Denise Lieberman, foundations and reproductive freedom groups.

The crowd was a mix of our most dedicated, decades-long supporters, volunteers, community members and folks newer to AU. It was exciting to witness the energy that our Missouri abortion-ban lawsuit has unleashed in support of our issue! Shout out to the brand-new member who took a chance on AU, showed up by herself and proclaimed to me at the end of the event: "I have found my people!"

Tulsa: Confronting Christian Nationalism

The next stop was Tulsa, where I was joined by my friend Robby Jones, author of the new book *The Hidden Roots of White Supremacy and the Path to a Shared American Future*, for an event titled "Christian Nationalism in America: Past and Present." Many thanks to Rabbi Daniel Kaiman and Congregation B'nai Emunah for the invite and for the co-sponsorship of Magic City Books, All Souls Unitarian Church, Fellowship Congregational Church and Tulsa Metropolitan Ministries.

Robby and I dialogued before a crowded, buzzing room of nearly 200 people, including high school and college students, current and retired educators, faith leaders, congregants from different religious backgrounds, atheist leaders (thanks for coming, Seth Andrews!), lawmakers (state Rep. Mickey Dollens made the trip from Oklahoma City), lawyers and community activists.

Power in the red states

During this trip, I realized how critical it is for Americans United to go to red states. We don't need to explain how important our issue is there. And we don't need to spend a lot of time connecting the dots between Christian Nationalism and the many setbacks we're facing today in our laws. They get it. And they are so appreciative of national groups investing in them. They are too frequently passed over because people assume there is no hope.

But what I saw — and what I felt — was a passionate, diverse group of people who had every single thing it takes to fight back, and fight forward. I think everyone in the room felt that, too.

At the end of our dialogue, I offered a thought about hope. Hope that comes from realizing that we're playing the long game, and that the roots we put down now will pay dividends in the future of Oklahoma. Hope that comes from



AU President and CEO Rachel Laser (back row, second from right) and Vice President for Outreach and Engagement Brian Silva (front row, left) with leaders of the St. Louis Chapter.

remembering to invite people in.

I pointed out that I did that with my Uber driver, whom I had invited to the event that morning and who had showed up. Everyone met Germile, as he smiled and waved. Germile had driven my colleague Brian Silva and me to the Greenwood Rising Museum, which focuses on the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. We got to talking, and Germile knew so much about that tragic event that I was certain he would love hearing about Robby's book, which has a chapter on it. And I wanted the chance to tell him more about our church-state cause.

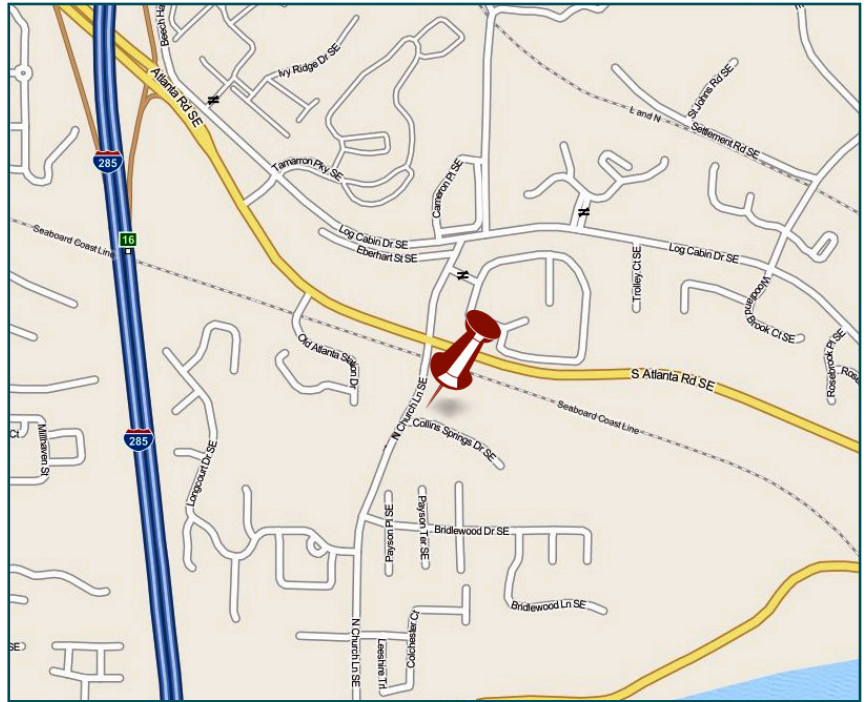
Germile made the effort to show up, and it meant so much to me. I reminded all of us that we can win, we have the power of the people — if we just believe in our own power, play the long game and invite people to join us.

*Dare To Think
For Yourself!*



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

**Social Gathering
12/10/23 1:00 pm EST
(Live Only)**



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