

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism:

Founding Ideas, Key Conflicts, and Modern Stakes

Scott Douglas Jacobsen
&
Dr. Herb Silverman

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 ScottDouglasJacobsen@yahoo.com

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

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Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 9, 2026

Preface: Scott Douglas Jacobsen

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism: Founding Ideas, Key Conflicts, and Modern Stakes is anchored in the context and history of the United States from the perspective of the secular. The history of the United States is marked by the dominance of religion and the recurring disadvantages faced by those without religious affiliation. Less often told are the stories of those who argued for pluralism not only among Christian sects, but for the equal acceptance of atheists, agnostics, humanists, Satanists, and others outside religious belief.

Dr. Herb Silverman's life story is part of the lesser-told tales of legal, political, and social pushback to this Christian dominance. Here, we look to history as process rather than strict chronology, legal frameworks, and ways in which this mixes in distinct ways with a lived social struggle driven by ethical commitments.

Herb serves as an interlocutor because he is a key figure in the fight for equality for the non-religious, even as fewer rights (i.e., stipulations of equal status) were won. Wins feel less positive than losses feel negative, even when they have equivalent objective standing. He founded communities, made landmark legal cases, and thus infused himself into this national secular narrative of the United States by will and force of personality.

Historical literacy is helpful, not even necessarily as a historian. One need not be a dilettantish poseur, but simply knowing some of the relevant history in a domain provides a basis for knowing one's place in a contemporary moment. A current regression in equal rights for the non-religious now becomes a momentary painful phase in a longer history of progressive development to equal status since the founding of the country.

Also, bearing in mind, it's about 4-5% of the world population debating with itself. The broader conversation on secularism is situated internationally, with the United States as an intriguing test case. Most of the world gives some attention to the American situation, but largely to their domestic problems. That's important.

As an American, Herb has been a secular-rights litigant, a national-organization leader, a mathematical scholar, and an individual confronting the practical realities of church-state entanglement in a complex political environment, proclaiming equality for all while harbouring large constituents committed to restricting rights for non-religious Americans.

What you will find in this series of dialogues are pre-American indigenous traditions, colonial theocracies, Enlightenment influences, constitutional rafting choices, post-founding exclusions and long-term corrections, and the contemporary political regressions and social repressions, the foci are governmental neutrality toward religion and non-religion, freedom of conscience, equality under the law regardless of belief, and policy formation grounded in reason and evidence.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen

January 9, 2026

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 1 – Knowing History and Making History

2019/09/08

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about the beginnings of American secularism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Herb, you made American history for the secular communities. This remains the fact of the matter. In the secular world, you exist as an icon and, in fact, a beloved one, as a mild-mannered liberal Jewish Yankee mathematician atheist who found his way, ironically, into the world of politics of Republican owned South Carolina. What is the feeling in the latter half of life in reflection of these facts, these achievements? When did American secularism start? What founding philosophy set this forth? Before America existed as a bounded geography, what Native American traditions seem to reflect secular ideals?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Thank you so much for your kind words. I don't think of myself as an icon, just someone who stumbled into an unusual situation. When I learned in 1990 that our South Carolina Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office, I spoke to a lawyer at the American Civil Liberties Union to see how this unconstitutional provision could be changed. He told me that an atheist would need to mount a legal challenge by running for governor, and he said that the very best candidate would be me. There was no competition, so after giving it some thought, I agreed to be the *Candidate Without a Prayer*. Finally, in 1997 the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled unanimously in my favour, nullifying the anti-atheist clause in the South Carolina Constitution.

All the credit for my Supreme Court victory belongs to my lawyers. I was just having fun giving talks and writing about my experiences. I also learned about and became engaged with the secular movement, leading me to help organize what became the Secular Coalition for America.

I'm optimistic about the future. The secular movement is growing, both formally through secular organizations and informally through "nones." The "nones," those who don't subscribe to any faith, are the fastest growing "religion" in the United States, especially among young people. Some of the "nones" got fed up with their conservative religion that was anti-LGBTQ, anti-women's rights, and anti-science, with little emphasis on loving their neighbour. Pedophilia has also discouraged people from maintaining their church affiliation.

On the other hand, religious fundamentalists continue to flourish during this period of increasing secularization. Influence of religion at the highest levels of government under Donald Trump has

never been stronger. It is up to secularists working with all who favour separation of religion and government to counter the influence of religion in government.

Religious fundamentalists often claim that America is a Christian nation. It is, in the same way that America is predominantly a white nation. The majority of Americans are both white and Christian. However, we are not now, nor have we ever officially been, a white nation or a Christian nation. Those who believe America was once a Christian nation may be hearkening back to the first Europeans who settled here, before America became a nation.

Those Pilgrims and Puritans were religious dissenters from Europe who sought freedom of worship in America for their own religion, but most definitely not for other religions. They had no use for religious liberty. Most of the early colonies made blasphemy a crime, an offence that could be punishable by death. Those colonies were mostly theocracies, where people who believed in the “wrong” religion were excluded from government participation and persecuted. For example, the Puritans, who established the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630, required all Massachusetts citizens to pay a tax to the Puritan Church. This church-state union led to the Salem witch trials of 1692, based on the biblical mandate: “Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.”

In the American Revolution that started in 1776, political leaders began to construct a new federal government. The soon-to-be United States of America not only declared independence from England, but also declared something even more radical—that “Governments are instituted among men deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.” Americans rejected kings crowned by bishops, who had been supposedly vested with a God-given authority to rule through “divine right.”

The framers of the U.S. Constitution wanted no part of the religious intolerance and bloodshed they saw in Europe. They wisely established the first government in history to separate religion and government. James Madison, affectionately known as the Father of our Constitution, said, “The purpose of separation of church and state is to keep forever from these shores the endless strife that has soaked the soil of Europe in blood for centuries.” Our founders understood the devastating nature of holy wars. They wisely established a secular nation whose authority rests with “We the People” (the first three words of the U.S. Constitution) and not with “Thou the Deity.”

Our founders were products of the Enlightenment. We can consider many of them freethinkers who felt that humans should not be governed by faith in the supernatural, but on reason and evidence from the natural world. Some were deists, believing in Nature’s God who set the laws of nature in motion and then retired as deity emeritus. Before Darwin and what we know of modern science, I, too, might have been a deist at that time.

The founders wrote the Constitution as a secular document, not because they were hostile to Christianity or religion but because they did not want the new federal government to have authority over religion or to meddle in it. Government must not favor one religion over another, or religion over non-religion. That’s why there are only two references to religion in the Constitution, and both are exclusionary. One is Article 6 of the U.S. Constitution: “No religious

test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” The other is in the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This guarantees American citizens freedom of conscience, the right to practice any religion or no religion.

No one’s religious liberty should feel threatened when the wall of separation between government and religion is kept strong and high. There is only one “religious liberty” Americans lack: The freedom to enlist the government to force others to acknowledge or support specific religious ideas. Unlike what many religious fundamentalists think, government neutrality is not government hostility toward religion. Our secular laws are based on the human principle of “justice for all,” and our civil government enforces those laws through a secular criminal justice system.

Sinclair Lewis, the first American to win the Nobel Prize in literature, might have foreseen what could happen if the religious right were to triumph in America. In 1939, he made this chilling statement after spending six months observing Hitler’s rise in Germany: “When fascism comes to America, it will be wrapped in the American flag carrying a cross.”

Beginning with Christopher Columbus, many Native Americans (then called savages) were enslaved and forced to convert to Christianity. They lost their land and were later forcibly put onto reservations, leaving the rich land they had lived on to Christian settlers ready to work for God and Country. The majority of Native American tribes, many of whom were agricultural, had no concept of dominion over the land.

Most Native American religions did not distinguish between the spiritual world and the natural world. Few Native American religions were considered absolutely unchangeable. Traditions varied from group to group, making their spirituality much less rigid than Christianity. What I like about Native American religions is that they don’t try to convert anyone. They accept that people have the religious freedom to believe and practice whatever they want. That’s also true of some religions today, but the most troublesome religious denominations are those that feel they deserve special rights and that they are obligated by God to convince everyone else of their one and only “truth.”

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 2 – Freethought Unbound by Geography, Nationality, and Ethnicity

2019/09/13

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about the revisionist attempts on American history.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Another issue comes in the form of the historical revisionists in the current period from Evangelical Christian fundamentalists who amount to selective literalists with the intent to ‘correct’ the American historical record – from their point of view – into an Evangelical Christian ethos and framework for looking at the world. How far back does regressive activism exist in America? How can this obscure the American record? How has the history of America been damaged by this form and branch of fundamentalism? How did American fundamentalism erase some traces of pre-American, Native American, history, permanently, to the detriment of the possible knowledge base of the Americas about human history? Who might count as the first Native American freethinker who went against the grain of the traditions of the Native American religions or ways of life with supernaturalisms assumed in them, though different as described? Who might count as the first American freethinker at or after the founding of the nation?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Why do some Christian fundamentalists claim that our founders wanted America to be a Christian nation? Most efforts to connect the United States with Christianity rely on quotes and opinions from a few colonial-era statesmen who professed a belief in Christianity, but their statements of beliefs say nothing about Christianity as the source of the U.S. government.

Patrick Henry proposed a tax to help sustain “some form of Christian worship” for the state of Virginia, but Thomas Jefferson and other statesmen did not agree. In 1779, Jefferson introduced a bill for the Statute for Religious Freedom which became Virginia law. Jefferson designed this law to completely separate religion from government. None of Patrick Henry’s Christian views ever got introduced into law in Virginia or our national government.

Unambiguous language from our founders really should settle this debate over whether America is a Christian nation. In 1797, the Treaty of Tripoli was negotiated by George Washington, signed by John Adams, and ratified unanimously by the Senate. It stated in part: “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” I wonder what part of “not” that Christian-nation advocates don’t understand.

There have always been people who erroneously believe the Founders intended to establish a Christian nation, but the framers were careful and thoughtful writers. Had they wanted a Christian republic, it seems highly unlikely they would somehow have forgotten to include their Christian intentions in the supreme law of the land. And I challenge anyone to find the words “God” or “Jesus” in the U. S. Constitution.

In debates I’ve had with those who think America was founded as a religious country, my opponents sometimes point to words in the Declaration of Independence as evidence of religious intent. However, the Declaration preceded the Constitution and does not represent the law of the land. The Declaration was a call for rebellion against the British Crown. The emphasis on people having inalienable rights was a way for our founders to distinguish us from an empire that asserted the divine right of kings. The Declaration mentions “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” and does not endorse Christianity or religion. “Nature’s” view of God agrees with the Deist philosophy. Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration, was a Deist and opposed to orthodox Christianity and the supernatural.

Another argument I’ve heard supposedly supporting religion in government is the constitutional requirement that elected officials take an oath or affirmation before they can serve. Oaths are not necessarily a call to God. At that time, kings would swear oaths by their crowns and knights would swear oaths by their knighthood, so the concept of swearing an oath to something other than God goes back a long time and was well-known when the Constitution was adopted in 1787. Had our founders wanted officeholders to invoke God, they could have worded the oath to accomplish that objective. Instead, the oath or affirmation to uphold the Constitution contains no reference to God, need not be administered on the Bible and need not even be considered an oath. The option to either swear an oath or make an affirmation was written into our Constitution for the purpose of including those who did not feel comfortable swearing an oath to anything, let alone to God or some other deity.

An even weaker argument is that the Constitution was signed with the words “in the year of our Lord.” But that was a standard way of dating important documents in the 18th century. Its use was conventional, not religious, just as today we may use B.C. (Before Christ) or A.D. (Anno Domini, Latin for “the year of our Lord”) without having any religious intent.

While the federal government was not a Christian nation, it didn’t initially prohibit states from establishing their own state churches. Some early state constitutions limited holding public office to Christians or even to the correct religious denomination. Such provisions represented a more intolerant time in our history. States with government-favored religions gradually began moving toward separating religion and government, with the last state disestablishment occurring in Massachusetts in 1833.

The best-known Freethinker Founder was Thomas Paine. He influenced more early Americans than any other writer. In his pamphlet *Common Sense*, Paine made a case in clear and persuasive prose for independence from Great Britain, using arguments that had not yet been given serious intellectual consideration. Paine marshaled moral and political arguments to encourage common people in the Colonies to fight for egalitarian government. *Common Sense* was published at the beginning of the American revolution, and in proportion to the population of the colonies at that

time (2.5 million), it had the largest sale and circulation of any book published in American history.

Nonetheless, Paine hasn't received the credit he deserves, being mostly ignored in American history. The reason is because of his irreverent book called *The Age of Reason*. In it he says, "I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my church." And furthermore, "Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is no more derogatory, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself than this thing called Christianity." Many contemporary politicians sympathized with the views of Paine but didn't openly support him for fear of the Religious Right of that day.

Years later, President Theodore Roosevelt referred to Paine as a "filthy little atheist" even though Paine considered himself a deist. Thomas Jefferson, who was sympathetic to Paine, got in trouble when he said, "It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." It is only recently, with more open Freethinkers today, that Thomas Paine's accomplishments have been given the credit they deserve.

Another unknown leader in the American Revolution was Philip Freneau, recognized as the poet of the American Revolution, and America's first atheist poet. See a fine article about him in *Free Inquiry*, August/September 2019. Freneau's definition of theology is "the study of nothing." He also said that the profession of priest is "little better than that of a slothful Blockhead." Freneau denied the existence of an afterlife and viewed death as "a sleep that has no dreams."

I know of no Native Americans promoting atheism, perhaps because there is no doctrine that they are expected to believe or follow. I think the belief that there are no gods began when theism began. On the day that humans invented religion, other humans invented atheism.

A case can be made that the Christian brand of fundamentalism today is a consequence of the Bible Belt mentality during the Civil War. The Baptist denomination split as Baptists in the South broke away from the North and formed the Southern Baptist Convention, so they could continue to promote slavery within their religion. Slave owners did not want a religion that would make them feel guilty about the source of their riches. Their ministers preached a doctrine that their flock wanted to hear—the right of white men to own slaves who owed obedience in return, and a message that promoted the subjugation of women, Native Americans, and others. There are certainly passages of the Bible that condone slavery, and none that oppose it. The rich and powerful took their riches as a sign of God's blessing on them. They were not interested in social justice.

In their pursuit of worldly power and dominion, conservative American churches today have thrown away the moral authority they once possessed. Now, as their prestige declines and their membership ebbs, they pursue government support. But as Benjamin Franklin said, "When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its professors are obliged to call for the help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one."

Congress mandated “In God We Trust” on all currency in 1955, and it was adopted as the national motto in 1956. The original U.S. motto, chosen by John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Jefferson, is *E Pluribus Unum* (Of Many, One), celebrating diversity, not theocracy.

Although we don’t have an official established religion, the Republican Party has tied Christianity tightly to a narrowly partisan and conservative set of policy priorities. They’ve spent the past several decades insisting that being Christian means politically opposing LGBTQ rights, reproductive choice, and supporting war and tax cuts for the rich. Many Christians want to bring back school-sponsored prayers and demand that sex education classes in public schools teach “abstinence only” instead of preparing teens to avoid pregnancy and disease.

You will not find any support in the Bible for treating with respect those who have different or no religious beliefs. Scientific advances are particular targets. When a science book is found to be wrong, the mistake is corrected in subsequent books. But for biblical literalists, if the scientific evidence contradicts the Bible, it is the evidence that is thrown out.

In 2002, President George W. Bush said, “We need commonsense judges who understand that our rights were derived from God.” But “rights derived from God” is a belief, not an understanding, and judges are supposed to make decisions based on the rule of law, not on their personal religious beliefs. Similarly, President Trump recently said, “In America, we’ve always understood that our rights come from God, not from government.” These are examples of government leaders who want to turn our democracy into a theocracy. If Christian nation advocates were ever to have their way, this would no longer be the secular nation our founders so proudly formed.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 3 – Idealism Above, Realism Below

2019/09/18

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about the drafts of the American Constitution and personal beliefs behind it.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: During the writing of the American Constitution in its first drafts, and after its completion after the Declaration of Independence, when considering the histories of the framers, what statements in these documents contradicted the personal beliefs or the individual biographies of the framers?

Dr. Herb Silverman: The religious faith of our founders is irrelevant because they erected a wall of separation between religion and the government they created in our founding documents, the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. However, since you ask, and since there is curiosity about the personal beliefs of our founders, here are some interesting tidbits.

Many of our founders were anti-Catholic. John Adams called Catholicism “nonsense, a delusion, and dangerous in society.” Thomas Jefferson called Catholicism “a retrograde step from lightness to darkness.” (I agree with these founders and would add, as Thomas Paine did, all the other religions.) John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, drafted language for the New York Constitution proposing tolerance for everyone except Catholics who refuse to renounce papal authority. At the time of the American revolution only about 1.6 percent of the population in the colonies were Catholic. It wasn’t until the immigration waves of the nineteenth century that Catholics began arriving in America in large numbers. This led to the aptly named “Know Nothing” party, formally called the American Party, an anti-Catholic and anti-immigrant party formed in 1850. I was raised in Philadelphia, home of the 1844 “Bible riots” where both Catholics and Protestants were clubbed to death over which version of the Lord’s Prayer should be recited in public school. Protestants won the political battle, and Catholics responded by forming Catholic schools nationwide by 1860.

In a letter to John Adams in 1823, Thomas Jefferson said: “And the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.” He told his nephew in 1787 to “question with boldness even the existence of God.” Jefferson considered reason and science, not superstition and supernaturalism, to be his guides. He wrote his own version of the

Christian Bible, leaving out miracle stories and including only what made sense to him. Jefferson referred to what remained as “Diamonds in a dunghill.”

Deism was a rational challenge to orthodox Christianity. Deists believed that the world was the work of a non-intervening Creator. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and other founders expressed religious views that were strongly deistic. Many founders reflected Deist language in their writings. Thomas Paine, in *The Age of Reason*, argued that Deism should replace all revelation-based religion. Most of our Founding Fathers were religiously liberal for their time, and thought of the new country as an experiment in secular democracy. Producing a God-free Constitution showed their disdain for intermingling religion and government. George Washington refused to take communion (even though his wife did), reflecting his Deistic tendency to avoid supernatural ritual. He did make some religious gestures to conform to the religious expectations of the times, though he refused to have a priest or religious rituals at his deathbed.

Christian Deism stressed morality and rejected the orthodox Christian view of the **divinity of Christ**, often viewing him as a sublime, but entirely human, teacher of morality. Instead of accepting the entire Bible as divinely inspired, many believed that reason was the ultimate standard for determining which parts of the Bible were legitimate revelations from God.

The Declaration of Independence was a call for rebellion against the British Crown. It does mention a higher power four times, as in Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God, Supreme Judge of the world, Creator, and divine Providence. In each case it is an appeal to human dignity. It emphasizes people having inalienable rights. No appeal is made in this document to a god that has authority of any kind. No powers are given to religion in the affairs of man. The founders never cited biblical principles during the Constitutional Convention and ratifications. Both the Declaration and the Constitution source the legitimacy of political rule exclusively in the consent of the governed. Benjamin Franklin, a co-author of the Declaration of Independence with Thomas Jefferson, decried Christian church services for promoting church memberships instead of “trying to make us good citizens.”

Benjamin Rush, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, believed that the Christian religion should be preferred to all others, and that every family in the United States should be furnished, at public expense, with a copy of the Bible. The founders rejected this idea. Orthodox Christians among the Founders include the Calvinistic Samuel Adams, John Jay (who served as president of the American Bible Society), Elias Boudinot (who wrote a book on the imminent second coming of Jesus), and Patrick Henry (who believed in Evangelical Christianity and distributed religious tracts while riding circuit as a lawyer).

As a member of the Constitutional Convention, George Mason strenuously opposed the compromise permitting the continuation of the slave trade. Although he was a Southerner, he called the slave trade disgraceful to mankind. “God” stayed out of the Constitution, but slavery remained in order to keep the Southern colonies as part of this new nation.

The forces opposed to adoption of the Constitution argued that the “no religious test clause” would lead to Catholics, Jews, Mahometans (Muslims), and pagans obtaining office. That is the point of including the clause.

The phrase a “hedge or wall of separation between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world” was first used by Baptist theologian Roger Williams, founder of the colony of Rhode Island. It was later employed by Jefferson as a commentary on the First Amendment and its restriction on the legislative branch of the federal government. Thomas Jefferson refused to issue Proclamations of Thanksgiving sent to him by Congress during his presidency. After retiring from the presidency, James Madison argued for a stronger separation of church and state, opposing the very presidential issuing of religious proclamations he himself had done, and also opposing the appointment of chaplains to Congress. James Madison said, “Religion and government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together.”

The absence of an establishment of religion did not necessarily imply that all men were free to hold office. Most colonies had a **Test Act**. Charles Carroll from Maryland, the only Catholic signer of the Declaration, guaranteed full rights to Protestants and Catholics, but not to Jews, Freethinkers, or Deists. He said, “When I signed the Declaration of Independence I had in mind not only our independence of England, but the tolerations of all sects professing the Christian religion, and communicating to them all equal rights.” Several states had these religious tests for a short time. In my state of South Carolina, Protestantism was recognized as the state-established religion. This stood in contrast to the Federal Constitution, which explicitly prohibits the employment of any religious test for federal office, and which, through the Fourteenth Amendment, later extended this prohibition to the States.

There were many attempts by state ratifying conventions to amend the Constitution and subvert the intent of the preamble by declaring that governmental power was derived from God or Jesus Christ, but the proposed religious amendments were defeated.

Though there was some debate about possibly including “God” in the congressional oath, the nation’s first lawmakers instead decided on strictly secular language. It was signed into law by George Washington on June 1, 1789, making it the first law passed by the new United States government.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 4 – Anti-Catholic, Anti-Religion, and Non-Religion

2019/09/21

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about the founders and beliefs.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: As you noted the anti-Catholic nature of some of the framers of the American Constitution, you provided some insight into the ways in which the nature of the deism of the brightest American minds of the time represented something more akin to non-religion or a nearly modern notion of secularism in America with the base separation of church and state.

My suspicion: if in an alternate universe in which Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species (by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life)* in the era of the framers of the American Constitution, then the established-as-deists would have identified and affirmed an atheist viewpoint of the world because biological, organic life must have seemed utterly incomprehensibly complicated and functional without the modern and fundamental theoretical basis for all life sciences.

You and I live as modern secular and freethought people with due credit to the deists and pantheists of the previous generations. I decline any sentiment or argument as anti-Catholics or anti-religious-people – to individual religious believers, hierarchs, intellectuals, scientists, theologians, or similars, but affirm anti-Catholicism and anti-religion – to abuses of power, belief structures, beliefs, ideological stances, institutional orthodoxy, institutions, purported authority and inspiration of holy texts, supernatural and magic powers, and the like – and also affirm non-religion as in secularism within a more modern interpretation.

When did anti-Catholicism and anti-religion wane amongst the framers or their descendants leading more into non-religion if there was any distinct set of moments or period in time? How were the seeds of modern atheist and non-religion movements set at the founding of America? How did the massive influx of religious immigrants change the landscape of America – its demographics? What amendments to the American Constitution have been important to the establishment equality of freethought and secular American citizens?

Dr. Herb Silverman: I agree with you that many eighteenth-century Deists might have been atheists had they been familiar with the work of Charles Darwin. However, Darwin's theory of natural selection only explains that we have a variety of species, including human animals, because they adapted to their environment. Evolution says nothing about how life began. Many

Deists would probably still have believed in a Creator who started the process, and then let nature take its course.

Later scientific discoveries would probably have turned these Deists into atheists. We now know that our universe did not begin with a Creator, but with a “Big Bang” approximately 13.8 billion years ago. We still don’t know how life began, although *abiogenesis* is a reasonable hypothesis. This is the natural process by which life has arisen from non-living matter, such as simple organic compounds. It’s interesting that Bible believers refuse to believe this hypothesis about life arising from non-life, though they believe that the first human was made from dirt and the second human from the rib of the first. Did God run out of dirt?

Since we don’t know for sure how life began, I understand why some people attribute life to a Creator. I can’t prove they are wrong, but I can prove that those who regard the Bible as a scientific book are wrong. I’m an atheist because I see no evidence for the existence of any gods, not because I can prove there are no gods.

You mention that you affirm non-religion. I do, too, but I would rather say that I affirm nontheism, meaning no gods. There are religions without gods or supernaturalism. As an atheist, some people assume I must be anti-religion. Not so. By one measure, I might be the most religious person in America. You see, I have not one, not two, but three different religions: I’m a member of the American Ethical Union, with Ethical Culture Societies; I’m a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, with atheist rabbis; and I’m a member of the Unitarian Universalist Humanists. All three religions are nontheistic and are active participants in the Secular Coalition for America.

When our nation was founded, not just anti-Catholicism flourished. There were 150 attacks against Baptists in Virginia between 1760 and 1778, many by leaders of local Anglican churches. In the seventeenth century, Massachusetts hanged people for being Quakers. The first “War on Christmas” was initiated by Puritans because the Bible did not sanction the holiday, and they believed Christmas was invented by Catholics and pagans, who engaged in too much merriment and drinking. The Puritans promoted Protestantism, the religion invented to protest Catholicism.

At America’s founding, 98 percent in the colonies were Protestant, but the divisions among Protestant sects and between Protestants and Catholics were intense. Some people were Protestant in name only, while others were fervent believers in their sect. Only 17 percent in 1776 attended church, so not many were passionate about their religion. Such indifference might indicate a large number of freethinkers in the colonies, including Deists and maybe even atheists.

Some of our framers, including James Madison, wanted the “no religious test” clause in the United States Constitution to apply to all states. That failed to pass. Initially, eleven of the thirteen states had religious tests, stipulating that only Christians, or in some cases only Protestants, could hold public office. A notable exception was Pennsylvania, founded by the Quaker William Penn. He decreed that Pennsylvania would be a “Holy Experiment” in toleration. All sects, including freethinkers, were welcome. Penn also founded Philadelphia, my birthplace, which is known as the city of brotherly love. Philadelphia is Greek for “brotherly

love.” Philadelphia had the only Catholic church in the colonies that was protected by the authorities.

The influx of immigrants throughout its history has made America more religiously diverse. For that reason, there has always been an anti-immigrant constituency who feared the religion of the immigrants, and how that could change the values of the country. Initially the opposition was to Catholics, and today it is to Muslims. We have an opportunity now to show the world how people of different faiths and none can coexist and thrive. Founder James Madison argued that the best way to promote religion was to leave it alone. Previously, those who wanted to encourage religion had enlisted the government’s help. Without government support, America now has 360,000 houses of diverse worship.

Today Protestants, Catholics, and other Christians put aside some of their theological differences to work together on important political issues, and grab media attention. I disagreed with everything the Christian Coalition, founded in 1989 by Pat Robertson, stood for (preventing women from having access to reproductive health care, promoting that evolution is just a myth, contending that our country was founded as a Christian nation, opposing LGBT rights, demonizing atheists and secular humanists). Nevertheless, they helped change the culture, and made politicians take notice. The Secular Coalition for America is a counter to the Christian Coalition and its successors, and SCA member organizations are working together to keep the country secular, not theocratic.

The First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, the right to practice any faith or none. Some people, including politicians, wrongly say that we have freedom OF religion, not freedom FROM religion. This is, of course, nonsense. You can’t have “of” without “from.” Giving people the right to believe also guarantees the right not to believe.

Finally, the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution has been important to secular Americans. It says that constitutional rights guaranteed by the federal government must apply to all states, regardless of state laws. The amendment passed in 1868, after the Civil War, and granted citizenship and equal rights to slaves who had been emancipated. This amendment was also the basis of my winning court case when I learned that the South Carolina Constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office, a clear violation of the 14th Amendment because the U.S. Constitution prohibits religious tests for public office.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 5 – Colonization and Its Aftermath

2019/10/09

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about colonization and its aftermath.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: If we look at the early American experiment apart from the leaders of the nation at the time and the framers of the Constitution, there still existed, and still remain extant, the Native American populations scattered throughout the bounded geography known as the United States of America.

The same story playing out throughout the world amongst conquered peoples, whether by Europeans with Christianity or otherwise. In this massive instance, the wiping out of the indigenous population of North America. Charlie Hill, who had a set on *The Richard Pryor Show*, in later interviews before death spoke of “stuck on stupid” in terms of some of the mentalities of some of the white folks (culture and social attitudes in mind), of Euro-Americans (often associated with this American ethnic group).

Another time, Hill elaborated, “Americans are stuck on stupid. It’s not a skin color, it’s an attitude. And, the only way they’re going to get right with everything is to get right with Indians. The way it should be done—with honor and respect.” How did the project of colonization destroy the early possibility of relations between foreigners of the time, Europeans, and the original inhabitants of the land, the Native Americans? How did this get worse in some ways and better in other ways over time?

What seem like a means by which to deal on equal terms rather than Christian, Euro-American, or white folk terms and standards in modern relations? How can humanist and freethought communities provide a better ethical foundation for this? How has the project of colonization influenced the members of the freethought community who leave traditions or enforced religions if they have a Native American heritage insofar as you know as an American – as I am Canadian?

Dr. Herb Silverman: I think most Americans agree that in the past both European settlers and later generations of Americans treated Indians (now called Native Americans) very badly. Treaties between the U.S. and sovereign Indian tribes were unequal or broken. The government sought to replace the population of Indian territories with a new society of white settlers. As white settlers spread westward across America after 1780, armed conflicts increased between the

settlers and Indians. The Indian Removal Act of 1830 authorized the U.S. government to enforce the Indian removal from east of the Mississippi River to the West, even though many tribes had extensive territories in that area. As American settlers kept expanding their territories, Indian tribes were relocated to specially designated territories.

This policy was known at the time as *Manifest Destiny*, the belief that the settlers in the United States were destined to expand across North America because of the special virtues of the American people and their institutions, including the Christian religion. This was nothing new. Beginning with Christopher Columbus, many Native Americans were enslaved and forced to convert to Christianity. They lost their land and were later forcibly put onto reservations, leaving the rich land they had lived on for Christian settlers ready to work for God and Country.

The Mexican-American War of 1846 resulted in the annexation of 525,000 square miles of Mexican territory, about half of Mexico. While not primarily about Native-Americans, Captain John Reid, from Missouri, was praised by the mayor of Parras in Mexico during the war for his “noble soul” and his determination to defend “Christians and civilized beings against the rage and brutality of savages.

Many of these actions probably come from so-called “American Exceptionalism,” the questionable notion that the United States occupies a special niche among the nations of the world due to its historical evolution and its political and religious institutions and origins. I wish it were about supporting human rights around the world, but now it seems more about promoting the perceived interests of America. Some Americans believe that God particularly blesses America and that we represent the **biblical city on a hill**. One of the many differences between evangelical Christians and atheists in the United States is that the majority of evangelicals believe that America is the greatest country in the world, compared with only 20 percent of those without religion who agree with that statement. When I think of American exceptionalism, I think of our being the first country with a godless constitution, governed by “We the People,” not “Thou the Deity.”

What seems strange to me is why so many Americans want all countries to emulate America, yet we currently (and in the past) have created so many barriers for those desperately seeking a better life here. Other than Native Americans, all Americans come from families who were immigrants. President Donald Trump has no good arguments for excluding immigrants, but had Native Americans initially known what European immigrants would do to them and their culture, they would certainly have wanted to keep such immigrants out.

Few Americans are aware of the California Genocide of Native Americans (1846-1873). Following the U.S. conquest of California, the government waged genocide against the Native Americans in that territory. California state and Federal authorities incited, aided, and financed miners, settlers, ranchers, and people’s militias to enslave, kidnap, murder, and exterminate a major proportion of displaced Native Americans. The California Act for the Government and Protection of Indians, enacted in 1850, provided for apprenticing or indenturing Indian children to Whites, and also punished “vagrant” Indians by “hiring” them out to the highest bidder at a public auction if the Indian could not provide sufficient bond or bail. This legalized a form of slavery in California.

United States federal law contains no statute of limitations on war crimes and crimes against humanity, including genocide, so lately some people have called for a genocide tribunal to investigate such past human rights violations and ethnic cleansing. In a speech before representatives of Native Americans in June 2019, California Governor Gavin Newsom apologized for the genocide. Newsom said, “That’s what it was, a genocide. No other way to describe it. And that’s the way it needs to be described in the history books.”

This is an indication that we may be ready to show some respect to Native Americans and treat them better. Many Americans read *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee: An Indian History of the American West*, which includes the 1890 Battle of Wounded Knee in South Dakota, a massacre of several hundred Lakota Indians, mostly women and children, by soldiers of the United States Army.

The American Indian Movement (AIM) is a Native American grassroots movement that was founded in the United States in July 1968 in [Minneapolis, Minnesota](#). AIM was initially formed in urban areas to address systemic issues of poverty and police brutality against Native Americans. AIM soon widened its focus from urban issues to include many Indigenous Tribal issues that Native American groups currently face, such as [treaty rights](#), unemployment, education, cultural continuity, and preservation of Indigenous cultures. Organization like AIM are helping to improve the lives of Native Americans.

Nevertheless, the situation for many Native Americans is dire, much worse than for African Americans. Approximately 90,000 Native American families are under-housed or homeless, and only 13 percent have a college degree. About 22 percent live on tribal lands or reservations.

I think the freethought community has always been supportive of rights for Native Americans. We mostly agree that Columbus Day is not a cause for celebration, and that we should reflect on what happened to Native Americans if we celebrate the holiday of Thanksgiving. We are probably disproportionately represented among non-Native Americans at protests organized by Native Americans. Of course, we should all look for ways to volunteer and contribute to this beleaguered community.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 6 – African-American History/Black History is American History

2019/10/14

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about African-American and American History.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: African-American history, akin to the creation of Native American history after the creation of The United States of America, is American history. Certainly, as far as I can tell, it is a distinct facet of American history, making American history a pluralistic affair. Nonetheless, as we covered some of the Native American pre-American and American history in the US, let's cover some African-American secular history.

Certainly, we can see several prominent and respected black freethinkers in the United States tackling on-the-grounds issues and others now. They did not emerge out of the aether. What is the history of freethought in America? How did some of this link to other freethought movements in America? Who were the important players? How did these individuals provide a context in which the African-American community could free themselves from the shackles of fundamentalist ideologies? At the same time, how did the church give some refuge for them?

Dr. Herb Silverman: I should first acknowledge some positives for African-American churches. Aside from giving people hope, they have often been a center for civil rights activism and a place that blacks could gather in large numbers without being harassed. I live in Charleston, South Carolina, just three blocks from Mother Emmanuel AME church, now internationally known because nine African Americans were murdered there by white nationalist Dylann Roof. This church was once a secret meeting place for African-Americans who wanted to end slavery at a time when laws in Charleston banned all-black church gatherings.

Some slaveowners and white Christian ministers in the nineteenth century read biblical verses to slaves as part of the worship services they allowed them to attend. They wanted to show that the Bible condones and supports slavery. The biblical curse of Ham (Genesis 9:25), one of the sons of Noah, was for Ham to be a servant to his brothers. This curse was used to justify slavery of black Americans on the ground that black Americans were descendants of Ham.

Other biblical justifications for slavery and why slaves should obey their masters include:

(1 Peter 2:18) Slaves, submit yourselves to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh.

(Ephesians 6:5) Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and sincerity of heart, just as you would Christ.

(Colossians 3:22) Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything; and do it, not only when their eye is on you and to win their favor, but with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

(Titus 2:9) Teach slaves to be subject to their masters in everything, to try to please them, not to talk back to them.

And here's how they thought they were showing mercy to slaves, because of possible punishment to the slave owner: (Exodus 21:20-21) When a man strikes his male or female slave with a rod so hard that the slave dies under his hand, he shall be punished. If, however, the slave survives for a day or two, he is not to be punished, since the slave is his own property.

The experience of slavery and the degradations of proslavery Christians led some enslaved blacks to varieties of unbelief. The most influential African American at that time was Frederick Douglass, who devoted his time, talent, and boundless energy to ending slavery and gaining equal rights for African Americans. After escaping from slavery in Maryland, he became a national leader of the abolitionist movement in Massachusetts and New York, noted for his oratory and incisive antislavery writings. He was described by abolitionists as a living counter-example to arguments of slaveholders that slaves lacked the intellectual capacity to function as independent American citizens.

Of his escape from slavery, Douglass said, "I prayed for twenty years but received no answer until I prayed with my legs." He said of pro-slavery Christian clergymen: "Welcome infidelity! Welcome atheism! Welcome anything! In preference to the gospel as preached by those divines! They convert the very name of religion into a barbarous cruelty."

Frederick Douglass was a good friend of the agnostic orator Robert Green Ingersoll. Douglass once remarked that Ingersoll and Abraham Lincoln were the only white men in whose company "he could be without feeling he was regarded as inferior to them."

Believing that all people are equal, Douglass supported the women's suffrage movement in addition to black emancipation. In 1848, he spoke at the Woman's Rights Convention in Seneca Falls, New York, which sparked the nineteenth-century woman's suffrage movement. Douglass was the only male to speak at the convention, drawing parallels between black men and American women as equally disenfranchised.

Here are a few other African American leaders who were also freethinkers:

W. E. B. Du Bois was a historian, civil rights activist, and a founder of the NAACP. His books include *The Souls of Black Folk* and *Black Reconstruction in America*. When he became head of the department at historically black Atlanta University in Georgia, the engagement was held up because he refused to lead a prayer. He also said, "I refused to join any church or sign any church creed."

James Baldwin was an American novelist, playwright, and activist. He described himself as not religious. Baldwin accused Christianity of "reinforcing the system of American slavery by palliating the pangs of oppression and delaying salvation until a promised afterlife." He wrote,

"If the concept of God has any use, it is to make us larger, freer, and more loving. If God can't do that, it's time we got rid of him."

Yosef Ben-Jochannan was an American writer and historian, author of 49 books. He said, "The churches can't help the people when the chips are down because their interest is with the power structure." He added, "The black man has called upon Jesus Christ for so many years in America, and now he starts calling on Mohammed, and there are many who are calling on Moses, and in no time within this period has the black man's situation changed, nor has the black man any freedom. It is obvious that someone didn't hear his call or isn't interested in that call, either Jesus, Mohammad, or Moses."

Alice Walker, civil rights activist and author of *The Color Purple*, said, "The only reason you want to go to heaven is that you have been driven out of your mind and off your land." She also said, "All people deserve to worship a God who also worships them. A God that made them, and likes them. That is why Nature, Mother Earth, is such a good choice. Never will Nature require that you cut off some part of your body to please It; never will Mother Earth find anything wrong with your natural way."

Actress Butterfly McQueen, who played an enslaved maidservant in *Gone with the Wind*, was an atheist, saying in 1989, "As my ancestors are free from slavery, I am free from the slavery of religion."

Though Martin Luther King, Jr. was religious, he advocated for the separation of religion and government, and supported the Supreme Court's decision to prohibit government-sponsored prayer in public schools. He also said, "I would be the last to condemn the thousands of sincere and dedicated people outside the churches who have labored unselfishly through various humanitarian movements to cure the world of social evils, for I would rather a man be a committed humanist than an uncommitted Christian."

Bayard Rustin, who helped organize freedom rides, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and King's March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, was an atheist. So was A. Philip Randolph, who also helped organize the March on Washington, where King gave his "I have a dream" speech. Randolph said, "We consider prayer as nothing more than a fervent wish; consequently, the merit and worth of a prayer depend upon what the fervent wish is."

Other black freethinkers who also played significant roles in the Civil Rights movement include leaders James Forman, Eldridge Cleaver, and Stokely Carmichael, all of whom rejected Christianity.

Anthony Pinn is the author/editor of over 30 books, including numerous volumes related to African American humanism. He received the 1999 African American Humanist Award from the Council for Secular Humanism and the 2006 award for Harvard University Humanist Chaplaincy Humanist of the Year.

And, of course, there is Neal deGrasse Tyson, well-known astrophysicist and science popularizer. He calls himself an agnostic, and said, "There is no common ground between science and religion. Religion only starts where scientific knowledge ends."

In 1989, Norm Allen Jr. founded African Americans for Humanism, the first explicitly secular organization for blacks. Then came Black Atheists of America and Black Nonbelievers Inc., as well as local groups such as Black Skeptics of Los Angeles. Black atheists today are not content to personally reject religion, but instead have a goal of spreading freethought to the broader black community. For example, author Sikivu Hutchinson and Mandisa Thomas, founder of Black Nonbelievers, argue that religion hurts the black community by promoting sexism, patriarchy, and homophobia.

In addition to denying the existence of God, encouraging the teaching of evolution in schools and fighting for the separation of church and state, black atheists want to find solutions to practical problems. Many have embraced Black Lives Matter, a secular movement unaffiliated with black religious institutions and ideology. They look for ways to improve the situation for blacks, and also to promote a more just, democratic, and less racist American society.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 7 – Presidents and Religious Affiliation

2019/10/17

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about American freethinker, or not, presidents.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Over time, I have heard or more often read repeated mumblings and murmurings from some American freethinkers of the possibility of major leaders, including presidents, of the United States being closet atheists or agnostics. However, most of the former presidents lived in even more religious times than America now. In that social climate, they remained quiet because citizens – a hunk of them – vote via political affiliation in association with religion.

If a Christian candidate, and open about it, a large sector of Americans seem to vote for them, as a Christian, as a Christian seen as a good person, and so on. How has the secular and philosophical landscape of Americans been influenced, impacted, by the voting records on religion? How many presidents, statistically, in American history were or are, probably, atheists or agnostics? What would be the fate of an open atheist or agnostic president for their political life? I recall the retort if you won the governorship, “Demand a recount!”

Dr. Herb Silverman: Religious beliefs of American presidents are difficult to determine, perhaps indeterminable. We can learn what they profess to believe and what church they attend, but I am often skeptical about what they truly believe. Let’s look at the last two presidents, Barack Obama and Donald Trump, both of whom are professed Christians.

Barack Obama had an atheist father and was raised by a secular humanist mother whose values he embraced. He used to say he was an agnostic, but he became a Christian when he ran for public office. At least Obama embraces some positive values of Christianity, like concern for immigrants and the poor, caring about your neighbor, honesty, and respect for the environment.

What Christian principles does Donald Trump embrace, unless you consider it Christian to nominate judges put forth by conservative white evangelicals? I know he disagrees with Luke 6:29: “If someone slaps you on the cheek, offer your other cheek.” I couldn’t find a biblical passage that says, “Slap him back ten times harder.” Nor does Trump follow Luke 14:1: “He who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Many of us wish Trump would heed Proverbs 12:15: “The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but a wise man listens to advice.”

Trump refused to disclose his tax returns because he claims they are under audit. He added, “Maybe I get audited so much because I’m a strong Christian.” Really? How much faith does that statement require? I think Donald Trump is an atheist because I can’t picture him believing in a power higher than himself. On the other hand, Trump might think that he is a god.

Given that presidents are usually smart and thoughtful people, I would think that quite a few who called themselves Christians did not believe most of the doctrines of their faith. There are at least 18 non-Christian presidents: George Washington (Deist), John Adams (Unitarian), Thomas Jefferson (Deist), James Madison (Deist), James Monroe (Deist), John Quincy Adams (Unitarian), John Tyler (Deist), Millard Fillmore (Unitarian), Abraham Lincoln (probably Deist), William Howard Taft (Unitarian), Dwight D. Eisenhower (no church until he became president). Many Unitarians also considered themselves Deists. Unaffiliated presidents are Ulysses S. Grant, William Henry Harrison, Andrew Johnson, and Rutherford B. Hayes. Probable nonbelievers include Martin Van Buren, Zachary Taylor, and Chester A. Arthur. If you include Quakers as non-Christian (which many Christians do), we can add Herbert Hoover and Richard Nixon.

Should the religious beliefs of a politician matter? They should if the person’s religious faith interferes with the duties and oath of office. I like what John F. Kennedy, the only Catholic president, said during his campaign: “I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute.” And Kennedy governed as if he were an atheist, which I suspect he might have been because it appeared that he did nothing more than follow certain rituals. While I would like to see President Trump impeached and convicted, I worry about his successor. It would be Christian fundamentalist VP Mike Pence. At the Republican national convention, Pence said, “I’m a Christian, a conservative, and a Republican in that order.” This sounds like he would govern by imposing some of his unconstitutional Christian values on the rest of us.

When now-Senator Jamie Raskin (D-MD) testified at a Maryland State Senate hearing in 2006 in support of gay marriage, Republican State Senator Nancy Jacobs said: “Mr. Raskin, my Bible says marriage is only between a man and a woman. What do you have to say about that?” Raskin replied: “Senator, when you took your oath of office, you placed your hand on the Bible and swore to uphold the Constitution. You did not place your hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible.”

I would much rather see a non-religious American president than a religious one, who might pledge his or her highest allegiance to religion instead of to the oath of office. Religious conviction must never interfere with the purely secular responsibilities associated with holding the highest office in America.

While politicians are reluctant to come out of the closet as atheists, there have been some non-religious gains. A Congressional Freethought Caucus was formed in 2018. This was a milestone for nonreligious Americans in our continual struggle for inclusion in the political process and recognition as a constituency. The Caucus promotes public policy formed on the basis of reason, science, and moral values. It protects the secular character of our government by adhering to the strict separation of church and state. It opposes discrimination against atheists, agnostics, humanists, seekers, religious and nonreligious persons, and champions the value of freedom of thought and conscience worldwide. The Caucus also provides a forum for members of Congress

to discuss their moral frameworks, ethical values, and personal religious journeys. The Caucus started with four members, and now has twelve, with more likely to join.

For people who want to contribute financially to local and national candidates who support secular values, there is now a Freethought Equality Fund PAC, which helps increase the number of nonreligious Americans running for public office. See <http://freethoughtequalityfund.net>

Scientific advancement isn't just making people question God. It's also connecting those who question. There are many atheist, agnostic, and humanist groups, along with Internet discussion groups and Meetups. "Nones," those with no religious affiliation, is the fastest growing "religious" group in America, especially among younger Americans. The latest survey shows that over 23 percent of Americans are "Nones," a higher percentage than for either Catholics or evangelicals.

In August 2019, the Democratic National Committee passed a resolution acknowledging the "value, ethical soundness, and importance" of non-religious Americans. The resolution mentioned that we advocate for rational public policy based on sound science and universal humanistic values. In addition, Sarah Levin, Director of Governmental Affairs of the Secular Coalition for America, was recently elected as a Co-Chair of the DNC Interfaith Council (not representing the nonpartisan Secular Coalition). In 2020, Democrats will need all the votes they can get, and they understand that they have more to gain by embracing the growing number of secular Americans than worrying about who might complain if they do.

There have been at least seven democratically-elected world leaders who have been atheists: Julia Gillard, former Prime Minister of Australia; Alexis Tsipras, Prime Minister of Greece; Francois Hollande, President of France; Zoran Milanovic, Prime Minister of Croatia; John Key, Prime Minister of New Zealand; Elio di Rupo, former Prime Minister of Belgium; Milos Zeman, President of the Czech Republic. Perhaps in the not-too-distant future we will have an American president who is an open atheist. Skeptical? Did you really expect to see a black American president in your lifetime?

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 8 – Minority Religions and the American Nation-State

2019/10/22

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about minority religions and the American nation-state.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Christian mythology pervades so much of the American landscape in the present day. It does the same for much of the long-term history of the United States too. Our references in the series look at mostly Christians, deists, pantheists, or the indigenous, whether the leadership or the population. Numerous minority religious belief systems exist in America today.

Many minority religions existed in America in the past. They have had interactions with the dominant religion and must have influenced the secular and freethought community over time. Islam and Judaism have had impacts on the political and social landscape of the United States of America. What have been impactful or important minority religions in the development of religion in America?

How have those religions been positive for secularism in America? How have those religions been negative for secularism in America? What has been the interplay between the dominant religion, minority religions, and the secular and freethought communities in the ongoing struggle for motion towards the proposed ideals of the United States with equality for all – in this case equality for the religious and the non-religious, the secular and the non-secular, or the naturalists and the supernaturalists?

Dr. Herb Silverman: Religious freedom, guaranteed by the United States Constitution, allows individuals to practice and promote any religion or no religion without government interference. Our founders supported freedom of religion because they understood that such religious diversity would help our new country avoid the kinds of wars that had plagued Europe, where hundreds of thousands of people had been tortured and killed over religious differences.

I view the existence of many minority religions as a “blessing.” Christians are wrong when they claim America is a Christian nation. It’s a Christian nation in the same way that America is a white nation. The majority of Americans are both white and Christian. However, America is not now, nor has it ever officially been, a white nation or a Christian nation.

One of my favorite minority religions is the Satanic Temple. Its members are mostly atheists. These Satanists might be having a little fun with the name, but their primary purpose is to promote secularism. They hit on a clever name to get publicity for promoting rational thought and separation of religion and government. But these “Satanists” especially trouble some religious believers because the name engages in their own religious narrative. The Satanic Temple has gained international attention for asserting equal rights for Satanists when other religious privileges have been granted, primarily to Christians. They have successfully applied for equal representation when religious monuments are placed on public property, opposed religious exemption and legal protection against laws that unscientifically restrict women’s reproductive autonomy, exposed fraudulent harmful pseudo-scientific practitioners and claims in mental health care, and they have applied to hold clubs alongside other religious after school clubs in schools besieged by proselytizing organizations.

In addition to being an atheist, a humanist, an agnostic, a freethinker, and other labels (depending on definitions), I’m also a Jew. The definition of a Jew is a person born of a Jewish mother. There is no requirement for a Jew to believe anything special. Many, if not most, Jews in America are atheists. I am a member of the Society for Humanistic Judaism, a nontheistic religion with atheist rabbis. Other religions consistent with being an atheist include Buddhism and Hinduism. Some Buddhists and Hindus believe in reincarnation, but that is not a requirement.

Many of us non-religious types like to collaborate with religious people to achieve common goals. An added bonus is that negative stereotypes might change when religious people and atheists get to know each other better. I’ve participated in a number of interfaith dialogues, though I would prefer a different term (perhaps “interfaith and values”). I think it’s terrific when interfaith groups invite atheists to join and work with them. These interfaith dialogues have mostly been with progressive religionists who are comfortable engaging with people of other faiths and none. They can more easily collaborate with us on good works than with conservative religionists, whose primary interest in those outside their narrow belief system is to proselytize. These interfaith religious believers seem to value behavior more than belief, and find in their holy books an obligation to advocate for social justice. The more conservative religious believers tend to place belief above behavior, and think of this life as preparation for an imagined afterlife.

Aside from deciding who allegedly goes to heaven, there have been countless claims by so-called experts about the specifics of an afterlife. How do we determine who the experts are? The number of experts on any given topic is inversely proportional to the evidence available on that topic. And by that criterion, we are all experts on the afterlife because there is absolutely no evidence for its existence. Anyone can make up stuff about heaven or quote stuff from books made up by others.

I think there is a lot of value even in religions I dislike because they help us maintain a pluralistic society. I’ll mention just two of many.

First, Islam. Given the high-profile atrocities committed by some Muslims in the name of their religion, a number of Americans oppose giving complete religious freedom to Muslims. They point to passages in the Quran that can be interpreted to justify atrocious acts. But the same can

be said about passages in the Hebrew and Christian Bibles. If you can find an interpretation in one holy book to justify an atrocity, then you can likely find a comparable interpretation and justification in the other holy books. These include genocide, holy wars, slavery, misogyny, death for crimes like blasphemy, homosexuality and worshipping the wrong god or even the right god in the wrong way. We need to distinguish between peaceful religious believers and those who are inspired by their holy books to commit atrocities. It becomes Islamophobia when we lump all Muslims into the same category.

Pope Francis once said that faith and violence are incompatible. Not if you read a comprehensive history of religion, including the history of the Catholic Church. Ironically, conservative Christians who seem most worried about Sharia agree with more tenets of Sharia law than do atheists like me. Sharia opposes abortion, contraceptives, and sex education, considers being gay a sin, has little tolerance for other religions, and treats women as subservient to men while claiming women are privileged within the religion.

I don't much care for the beliefs of Mormons, now called Latter Day Saints, especially their effective political opposition to same-sex marriage, opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and to physician assisted suicide. For nearly 150 years, the Mormon Church had taught that all blacks were cursed, which was why a black Mormon male could not become an LDS priest or enter the Mormon Temple. In 1978, LDS President Spencer W. Kimball claimed that God had removed the curse on blacks and that worthy black men could now become priests.

One amusing story about Mormons is that they baptize dead people. Many Jews, myself excluded, are upset that Mormons have sometimes focused on Jewish Holocaust victims (perhaps even my dead relatives) for posthumous baptism. This practice, however ludicrous, is fine with me. It does no harm to my deceased relatives or to me. In fact, I take this as an expression of good will, much like, "I'll pray for you." I believe in its positive sentiment, if not its efficacy.

In a debate I had in North Carolina with well-known Christian apologist William Lane Craig, I asked him during the debate what he thought of a different resurrection story believed by many Christians. After Jesus died, but before he went to heaven, Jesus stopped in the United States. This story was chiseled on gold plates in Egyptian hieroglyphics and buried in Palmyra, New York. In 1827, the angel Moroni led Joseph Smith to the gold plates and a magic stone. When Smith put the magic stone into his hat and buried his face in the hat, he was able to translate the plates into English. I asked Craig if he believed the Book of Mormon was true, and if he thought Mormons were Christians. Craig didn't respond during the debate. But after the debate, I asked Craig if he thought Mormons were real Christians, and he said, "No. They are a cult."

The word "cult" is not well defined. Christianity was once a cult of Judaism that eventually had enough members to rise to the status of sect. It became a separate religion when they added their own holy book, the New Testament. The difference between a religion and a cult seems to be the number of adherents. I once saw a cartoon showing a bearded guru at a table on the sidewalk holding a sign-up sheet. A giant thermometer in the cartoon marked off increasingly larger categories of religion, starting at the bottom with "handful of wackos," and moving up the

thermometer with “bunch of nuts,” “cult,” “faction,” “sect,” and at the top—“mainstream religion.” The poster next to the guru read, “Join us and help us reach our goal!”

Sen. Mitt Romney, a Mormon, once said, “The most unusual thing in my church is that we believe there was once a flood upon the earth, and that a man took a boat and put two of each animal inside the boat, and saved humanity.” Romney essentially said that his holy book is no more preposterous than other holy books. I think he has a point.

I’m just pleased that we tolerate all kinds of beliefs, as long as they are not forced on those who are not devotees or harm minors. I support the 1971 Supreme Court decision in the three-pronged “Lemon Test,” named after the lead plaintiff Alton Lemon. It says that government action must have a secular legislative purpose, must not have the primary effect of either advancing or inhibiting religion, and must not result in an excessive entanglement with religion.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 9 – The British

2019/11/01

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about the British and the Americans, and the American Revolutionary War.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: The British Empire produced some of the prominent Western philosophers, empiricists, and others. Obviously, the Americans and the British had a strained relationship for some time. What were some of the statements and ideas of the freethinkers on the American and the British sides during the American Revolutionary War? What were the different reactions to the American Revolution of the 13 colonies and the British Empire? What happened to the secular, men and women, during this time of war – common in American history?

Dr. Herb Silverman: The term *freethinker* emerged towards the end of the 17th century in England to describe people who stood in opposition to Christian churches and literal belief in the Bible. These people believed that they could understand the world through consideration of nature. In the United States, freethought was an anti-Christian and anti-clerical movement to make an individual politically and spiritually free to decide for himself on religious matters.

John Toland, an [Irish](#) philosopher and [freethinker](#) in the 18th century, was the first person called a freethinker (by George Berkeley, a Bishop in Ireland). Toland wrote over a hundred books, mostly dedicated to criticizing ecclesiastical institutions. In *Christianity Not Mysterious*, the book for which he is best known, Toland challenged not just the authority of the established church, but all inherited and unquestioned authority. Because of this book, he was prosecuted by a grand jury in London. The Parliament of Ireland proposed that he should be burnt at the stake, and in his absence three copies of the book were burnt by the public hangman.

British deists and freethinkers including John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Matthew Tindal focused on the human roots of Judaism, Christianity, Islam and ancient Paganism. They advocated tolerance and freedom of thought and fought against the influence of Christian doctrine on political and social life. They also denied the supernatural foundations of Christianity and analyzed the Bible with the aim to promote the free search for truth. They helped bring about Enlightenment views of religion and the secularization of Europe.

John Locke, who was British, inspired both the American and French revolutions. His arguments concerning liberty and the social contract motivated written works by Alexander Hamilton,

James Madison, Thomas Jefferson, and other founding fathers of the United States. One of Locke's passages is reproduced verbatim in the Declaration of Independence, the reference to a "long train of abuses." Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Bacon, Locke, and Newton. I consider them as the three greatest men that have ever lived."

Locke's theory of the "social contract" influenced the belief of many founders that the right of the people to overthrow their leaders was one of the "natural rights" of man. He also argued that all humans were created equally free, and governments therefore needed the "consent of the governed." Many scholars trace the phrase "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" in the American Declaration of Independence to Locke's theory of natural rights. At the time of the American revolution, the belief that rights came from God was widespread. British citizens believed in the divine right of kings.

Unlike many American founders, Locke was not a deist or a freethinker. He was a theist who accepted the cosmological (first cause) argument for the existence of God. Had Locke been born in our time, he might well have been an atheist.

Locke also had a strong influence on the French deist Voltaire, who called him "*le sage Locke*." Voltaire's major contribution to our founding fathers was his tireless quest for civil rights and his support for freedom of religion as well as separation of church and state. Voltaire's reasoning may be summed up in his well-known saying, "Those who can make you believe absurdities can make you commit atrocities." But my favorite quote of Voltaire is, "I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: 'O Lord make my enemies ridiculous.' And God granted it."

Many Americans at the time of the Revolution were attracted to "secular millennialism," a belief that we would someday be transformed into a utopian world of peace, justice, prosperity, and fellowship. The focus is on "worldly" transformation as opposed to "other-worldly" promises of spiritual salvation after death. Such predictions of America's destiny came from people like Thomas Paine and his enormously influential pamphlet *Common Sense*. The pamphlet's millennial-style passages include "We have it in our power to begin the world over again." Paine added, "The birthday of a new world is at hand." In Paine's view this new world would be far from theocracy, grounded not on ecclesiastical authority, but on the principles of a democratic republic and equal rights.

While religious ideology was an important inspiration for many Americans, the military of the new American nation had no religious policy. Soldiers mostly appeared to have been indifferent to the religious consequence of the Revolutionary War. The war was over the birth of a new nation, rather than a new nation-with-church. Both the British and American sides tried to recruit Americans from every background for their cause. For many Americans, the ecclesiastical tyranny of tax-supported religious establishments was another form of oppression they were fighting against.

The American Revolution hurt the Church of England in America more than any other denomination because the King of England was the head of that church. Anglican priests in America swore allegiance to the King. *The Book of Common Prayer* offered prayers asking God to give the king victory over all his enemies. In 1776, the King's enemies were American soldiers

and loyalty to that church could be construed as treason. So, Anglicans in America revised *The Book of Common Prayer* to conform to political realities, eliminating allegiance to the king.

The Franco-American Alliance brought thousands of French troops onto American soil, exposing American soldiers to advanced forms of freethinking and anticlericalism. The American Declaration of Independence, Bill of Rights, and Constitution of the United States also inspired the French revolutionaries of 1789, offering an example of liberty for the world and an example for modern constitutional democracies. The French Revolution motivated people to put irreligious ideas of the Enlightenment into practice and later extended beyond France to other European countries, and to the American colonies. For Americans at that time, irreligion more often took deistic rather than an atheistic form.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 10 – Women’s Freethought from the Founding

2019/11/16

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about the British and the Americans, and the American Revolutionary War.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: One of the groups of people who received more universalized rights as persons within the United States apart from the aristocratic, white, wealthy, slave-owning males were white women. What were some of the firmaments of women’s anger at the injustices? Who were some of the original movers of this anger into positive action and progressive change? How has women’s anger been a catalytic force for women’s self-empowerment? Also, how has women’s anger been an unacknowledged, potentially, force for other positive movements for greater societal provision of equal rights and treatment to all constituents of the United States of America?

Dr. Herb Silverman: White women certainly had more rights than black slaves, but I don’t think women in general have ever been privileged. There are even some parallels between how women and enslaved people were treated. Both were expected to be passive, cooperative, and obedient to their master-husbands.

Next to my wife Sharon, my favorite women are Sarah and Angelina Grimké, sisters from Charleston, South Carolina, who lived in the 18th century and deserve to be better known than they are. Their father, Judge John Grimké, was a strong [advocate of slavery](#) and of the subordination of women. He had hundreds of slaves, and served as chief judge of the South Carolina Supreme Court. Though raised with slaves, the Grimké sisters grew to despise slavery after witnessing its cruel effects at a young age.

In 1836 Angelina wrote her *Appeal to the Christian Women of the South*, imploring white southern women to embrace the antislavery cause. She said, “I know you do not make the laws, but I also know that you are the wives and mothers, the sisters and daughters of those who do; and if you really suppose you can do nothing to overthrow slavery, you are greatly mistaken.” Her writing drew the ire of many southerners. By the late 1830s, Sarah and Angelina were known not only as abolitionists but also as proponents of women’s rights.

The Grimké sisters left the South in the 1820s and moved to Philadelphia, where I was born, and became Quakers. At a time when it was not considered respectable (even in the North) for women to speak before mixed audiences of men and women, Sarah and Angelina boldly spoke

out against slavery at public meetings. Some male abolitionists, like Frederick Douglass, supported the right of women to speak and participate equally with men in antislavery activities.

The Grimkés grew up in a Charleston house built in 1789, three blocks away from where I now live. In 2015, the Friends of the Library at the College of Charleston (where I was a math professor) unveiled a much-deserved historical marker outside the Grimké home.

The Grimké sisters were good friends with Elizabeth Cady Stanton, an abolitionist and a leading figure of the early women's rights movement. Her Declaration of Sentiments, presented at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848, parallels the American Declaration of Independence, but with women included. It asserts that both men and women are endowed with unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. It explains how women are oppressed by the government and a patriarchal society. Stanton calls for women's suffrage as well as participation and representation in the government. She also refers to women's lack of property rights, and inequality in divorce law, education, and employment opportunities. The document insists that women be full citizens, granted all the rights and privileges that are granted to men. The Seneca Falls Convention marked the start of the women's rights movement in the United States.

Suffragette Susan B. Anthony was a good friend and collaborator with Elizabeth Cady Stanton. However, even though Anthony was an agnostic, she didn't like Stanton's open criticism of religion because she feared it would lose supporters for the suffragette movement. In particular, Anthony was displeased with Stanton's publication of *The Woman's Bible*, which was justifiably critical of religion. Stanton said, "The Bible and the church have been the greatest stumbling blocks in the emancipation of women," and "Surely the immutable laws of the universe can teach more impressive lessons than the holy books of all the religions on earth." Stanton also said, "I have endeavored to dissipate religious superstitions from the minds of women, and base their faith on science and reason, where I found for myself at last that peace and comfort I could never find in the Bible and the church."

After a 72-year battle for women's suffrage, women finally got the vote in 1920 with the ratification of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. Women fighting for equality during the early part of the twentieth century focused on political equality. Yet to come were issues like workplace inequality, gender pay gap, sexual harassment, violence against women, and **#MeToo**.

Wifehood and motherhood are no longer regarded as women's most significant professions. Women now have more educational opportunities than ever before. Nurse and teacher (and maybe Catholic nun, if you consider this a profession) used to be pretty much the only professional positions open to women. In 1900, women earned only 19 percent of bachelor's degrees. Since 1980, women have surpassed men in the number of bachelor's degrees conferred annually in the United States.

Regarding the question of women's anger, women have been socialized to suppress anger and even question whether their anger is justified. A case can be made that getting angry might first be necessary before being motivated to work for change. People don't change the world by being

apathetic; they do it by getting angry and refusing to take injustice any more. Anger can be used constructively by women (and men) to fight intolerance and discrimination. Recently, female anger at Donald Trump's 2016 presidential win spurred historic numbers of women to run for public office in 2018 and today.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 11 – Gibraltarians: Climbing to the Top from the Top

2019/11/21

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In the context of the classism and racism found from the founding of the United States of America, one of the more salient facts—aligned with these titles for generalized analyses of the nature of American democracy—amounts to the limits of democratic norms in place. America was not a “democracy” at the founding, insofar as it was a plutocratic polyarchy: white, aristocratic, land-owning, slave-owning, formally educated men running the show from the top down.

The road upward, for those who wanted to be free, was rather easier for those climbing to the holy ground of more power and privilege found at the Temple Mount at the top of the societal mountain. How have these threads of racist assumptions and classist assertions reassured themselves generation after generation in American society, in which some aspects of the plutocratic polyarchy have been beaten back while others remain?

In a manner of speaking, we can scorn some aspects of the founding—and their ongoing legacy—while praising numerous American ideals and progressive developments over time, for a wider ethical consideration into a broader moral, tribal consideration. How have secular and humanistic ideas been tendencies in thought in American history, with greater emancipation and better opportunities for all, at times and over time?

Dr. Herb Silverman: You refer to America as a plutocratic polyarchy at its founding. Let's first define our terms.

A “plutocracy” is a government ruled or controlled by people of great wealth and income, while “polyarchy” means “rule by many,” and is a government ruled by more than one person (in your case, people of great wealth). A polyarchy may or may not be a democracy. A democracy is a government by all the citizenry who choose their leaders by voting for them in elections.

The founding fathers chose not to have a democracy. Some favoured a democratic popular vote for the president, while others argued that Congress should pick the president. Their compromise is known as the Electoral College—a small number of people selected by the masses to vote for president—because the founders did not trust the population at large to make the right choice. In modern practice, the Electoral College is a formality. Most electors are loyal members of the party that selected them, and wind up voting for that party.

The Electoral College was also part of a compromise to satisfy small states. Each state had at least as many electoral votes as they had representatives in Congress, which means that no state could have fewer than three votes. In a small state like Wyoming, each elector represents 70,000 votes, while in California each elector represents 179,000 votes.

The Electoral College was not the only constitutional limitation on direct democracy. States were permitted to ban women entirely. Slaves, of course, were not allowed to vote. However, there was a controversial “three-fifths compromise,” in which Black slaves would be counted as three-fifths of a person for the purpose of allocating representatives and electors. This compromise was made to ensure that Southern states would ratify the Constitution.

After the Civil War (1861–1865), the 14th Amendment to the Constitution in 1868 abolished the three-fifths rule and granted former male slaves the right to vote, while the 19th Amendment (1920) gave women the right to vote.

While America is not now as much a plutocratic polyarchy as at its founding, a case can be made that we are more of a plutocratic polyarchy today than in years past. The wealthiest one percent of American households now own 40 percent of the country’s wealth. The top 0.1 percent own about 25 percent, which is more than the bottom 90 percent owns. This was not the case under President Theodore Roosevelt (1901–1908), known as the “trust-buster” for preventing or eliminating monopolies and corporate trusts. He applied the Sherman Antitrust Act of 1890 to break up the largest railroad monopoly, Northern Securities Company, and regulated the largest oil company, Standard Oil. He also broke up other monopolies. Roosevelt said, “We had come to the stage where for our people what was needed was a real democracy; and of all forms of tyranny, the least attractive and the most vulgar is the tyranny of mere wealth, the tyranny of a plutocracy.”

Today, most Americans are entitled to vote, but there has been intimidation by those in power against voting by poor people, African-Americans, and immigrants. Many eligible people do not vote because they think that their vote does not matter. It is true that most Americans have little influence over the policies our government adopts, especially those at the lower end of the income spectrum who are effectively disenfranchised. Congressional representatives pay little or no attention to their opinions. Moving up the income ladder, influence increases slowly, but it is only at the very top that it has a real impact (plutocracy). Politicians of both parties receive substantial financial support from corporations, whose leaders demand that politicians reciprocate with favourable policies, including tax breaks that help increase the donors’ wealth.

As far as secular and humanistic ideas, I think secular humanists have always been on the side of the better angels of our nature. Humanists have opposed racism and misogyny in America. On the other hand, some people who say we need to “Make America Great Again” hearken to the days of white privilege when they could discriminate against those of a different race and those who had non-Christian religious beliefs or no religious beliefs. They would also like to use their privilege to take away rights from gays and lesbians.

Secular humanists are fighting against a plutocracy of powerful white evangelicals who want to turn America into a Christian nation, instead of the secular nation we are. White evangelicals

represent the base supporters of our Republican president. I know some atheists and humanists who consider themselves Republicans, but I have yet to meet one who supports President Donald Trump.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 12 – Lessons From an Elder: Coming Into One's Own

2019/12/02

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: You – and as a term of endearment and affection, for me, at least – exist as an elder within the freethought community, where you harbour a certain general affability, acquired wisdom, and perceptiveness on issues relevant to all ages of the freethought communities.

You have a secure place in America freethinker history. What is lost with age? What is gained with age? How does this change over time develop an understanding more rich in practical wisdom and perceptiveness via the experience of the times of the founders of the United States and the leaders of the different social reform movements in American history?

People in their time but not of it, in the sense of a widened vision of the possibilities of human relations. I intend this as a collective reflection on some of the writings in this series so far, in order to transition into other items of historical import to the philosophical and historical foundations of American secularism.

Dr. Herb Silverman: Thank you for saying I have a secure place in American freethinker history. If true, it would be because I did two things.

First, I ran for Governor of South Carolina in 1990 to challenge the state constitution prohibition against atheists holding public office. I didn't become governor, of course, but in 1997 the South Carolina Supreme Court ruled unanimously in my favor, nullifying the anti-atheist clause in the South Carolina Constitution. Credit for my Supreme Court victory belongs to my ACLU lawyers. I was just having fun giving campaign talks and writing about my experiences.

Second, during my legal battle, I learned about and joined several national atheist and humanist organizations that all promoted causes I supported, like separation of religion and government and increasing visibility of and respect for freethinkers. However, each organization was doing its own thing without recognizing or cooperating with worthwhile efforts of like-minded groups. I thought that these diverse organizations would accomplish more by showing strength in numbers and working together on those issues to bring about cultural and political change. So in 2002, I helped form the *Secular Coalition for America* and became its founding president.

The Secular Coalition started with 4 and now has 19 national secular organizations as members, covering the full spectrum of our movement. It also represents hundreds of local secular communities. It was the first organization to hire a lobbyist to take our issues to Congress.

Working with allies in the faith community, the Secular Coalition combines the power of grassroots activism with professional lobbying to impact laws and policies governing separation of religion and government.

You asked what is gained by age. Being involved with secular organizations for close to 30 years has given me institutional memory. When I hear suggestions about something we might try, I can often point to having tried that before and the outcome.

You also asked what is lost with age. On this, I am an expert. I'm 77 years old and like to think I can do whatever I used to be able to do, but I have contrary physical and mental evidence. Aside from age, longevity in a leader can become problematic. "Founder's syndrome" occurs when leaders view themselves as irreplaceable. I've seen many good leaders outstay their welcome. For an organization to flourish, a high priority for a leader should be to make him or herself replaceable. Atheists, above all, recognize that organizations have no "dear leaders" who communicate to us through a supernatural being. We pride ourselves on being independent, and we recognize the fallibility of all. Not to sound like a vampire, but new blood is good.

I think I managed to avoid founder's syndrome at the Secular Coalition for America. I sought and encouraged active participants and talented replacements. I'm now happily retired as SCA president, but was asked to continue to serve for a while on its Board of Directors.

Looking back at the history of the freethought movement, changes in communication have been mammoth. At the time of the founders and early social reform movements in the United States, social media consisted of books, pamphlets, and word-of-mouth. Today, people can instantly reach each other around the world through online communication. Word travels fast, but so does miscommunication, lately known as fake news (some of it intentional). Both atheists and religious fundamentalists are able to spread information as never before, but of course they differ on what they consider to be "fake news."

Speaking of fake news, the influence of religion at the highest levels of government has never been stronger than under President Donald Trump. He has appointed more than 150 judges, most of whom seem hostile to the separation of religion and government. He has ordered every department in the executive branch to work on faith-based partnerships, signing an executive order creating the "White House Faith and Opportunity Initiative," an office that undermines religious freedom by giving taxpayer money to religious groups and allowing them to discriminate, with little accountability and no transparency.

Not only are Trump's cabinet members very religious, but they also seem to oppose the separation of religion and government. Ben Carson, the Secretary of Housing and Urban Development, referred to the separation of church and state as "crap" prompted by "political correctness." Attorney General William Barr said, "The separation of church and state is for losers, liberals, and America-hating atheists."

Christian Nationalists and evangelicals, with Trump's blessing, have introduced legislation to teach the Bible in schools, display religious mottos in schools, discriminate in foster care and adoption, pass religious refusal in healthcare, and promote anti-science religious teachings. Whatever you think about Trump wanting to build a wall between Mexico and the United States, we must not let him tear down the wall between church and state.

Nonetheless, I'm cautiously optimistic about our future. It is up to secularists working with all who favor separation of religion and government to counter the influence of religion in government. The secular movement is growing, both formally through secular organizations and informally through "nones," those who don't subscribe to any faith. The "nones" are the fastest growing "religion" in the United States, especially among young people. Many "nones" broke from conservative religion because it is anti-LGBTQ, anti-women's rights, and anti-science. Pedophilia has also discouraged people from maintaining their church affiliation.

Based on surveys, the United States is becoming less religious every year. This is finally being reflected in politics. A Congressional Freethought Caucus, formed in 2018 with 4 members, promotes evidence-based public policy and is a forum for secular members of Congress. It now has 12 open members, with more likely to join. There has also been a 900% increase in the number of state legislators who identify with the atheist and humanist community (from 5 in 2016 to over 50 today).

And finally, thanks to the Secular Coalition of America and their Director of Governmental Affairs, Sarah Levin, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) this year embraced American nonbelievers for the first time, adopting a resolution that recognizes their contributions to society. At nearly one quarter of the total U.S. population, nonreligious Americans represent a sizeable voting bloc. This resolution marks the first time a major U.S. political party has specifically courted religiously unaffiliated people across the nation.

The resolution says that the DNC recognizes the value, ethical soundness, and importance of the religiously unaffiliated demographic, a group of Americans who contribute in innumerable ways to the arts, sciences, medicine, business, law, the military, their communities, the success of the Party and prosperity of the Nation; and that religiously unaffiliated Americans are a group that, as much as any other, advocates for rational public policy based on sound science and universal humanistic values and should be represented, included, and heard by the Party.

And looking to the future of freethought, I hope that one day every political party at every governmental level will adopt similar resolutions.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 13 – Everyday Bigotry and Prejudice: The Freethinkers Beneath the Spokespersons, Between the Headlines, and Below Equal Human Status

2019/12/07

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about fundamentalists.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: In interaction with some of the literalist believers in the obscure and obscurantist fundamentalists of the Christian faith, one can gather a sense of feeling unheard in the midst of the conversation. These come from the university students to the professoriate, even into the higher-order leadership – not as character analysis, but as a way of thinking as simply thoughting in mechanical (rote) form.

In that, facts are scorned. Basic human compassion is thwarted for attempts at conversion in the hopes of a hereafter. Unreason is raised above or over reason. Attempts to correct misconception or illogic, or denial of baseless (faith) claims, gets the retort, “You lie. Those are complete lies” (because anything not of Christianity comes from the Devil, who comes to believers and unbelievers alike, supposedly, as the “father of lies”). Thus, anything one does or says gets met with suspicion, as, basically, essentialization of distrust in the individual (you).

These modes of unthought truly warp human mentation – to me – for the worse, much worse – leaving aside the six Jesuit intellectuals, and other similars, murdered for working for peace: Ignacio Ellacuria Beas Coechea, S.J., Ignacio Martín-Baró, S.J., Segundo Montes, S.J., Juan Ramón Moreno, S.J., Joaquín López y López, S.J., and Amando López, S.J.

In Canadian society, we have a number of religious – Christian – universities and colleges, including Columbia Bible College, Heritage College & Seminary, Horizon College & Seminary, Prairie, Providence University College, Redeemer University College, Rocky Mountain College, St. Stephen’s University, Trinity Western University, Tyndale University College, Tyndale University College & Seminary, and Vanguard College.

These institutions of higher Christian learning espouse principles found at the start of this nation’s population *dans l’ensemble*. If not ‘by and large’ in some part, then, by and large, forced or coerced onto them in good time. One of these institutions, at least, harbours a previously mandatory covenant for all. Now, only mandatory for staff and optional for students.

That is to say, an obvious – though not stated in this fashion – mechanism for the prevention of critical inquiry and scrutiny of the acts and thoughts within the institution to the institutional representatives or to the external community surrounding it. A clear operation of control through signage of the community pact because, apparently, the first two divine covenants did not suffice for the community of the faithful.

Similar to the United States of America, its history, as noted by you, jumps forward, bumps back, while showing a trendline towards a wider circle of inclusion and separation between religion and government with the current Trump Administration period as a bump back.

All these prior sessions dealt with sectors without much status or consideration as people – simply as “unpeople” – in American law and policymaking, except over time. Marie Alena Castle – a late writing partner on some articles – whose commentary was on point and on time noted the center of the current battle exists in women’s bodies, reproductive systems, and their autonomous choices in either matter.

What can build bridges of communication between fundamentalist religious believers and freethinkers? What underlies the ideational trance of not even listening to the other side by literalist interpreters of faiths? How many religious institutions exist in America? What political influence comes from them? How do the institutions of higher learning ground themselves in religious belief in the history of the United States and continue to exert control over the minds of the young? Why women’s bodies – ‘because the Bible tells them so,’ as Annie Laurie Gaylor might state the matter? How have these forms of misogyny, control of the rebellious positive curiosity and inquisitiveness of the young, and politicking played out and converged in the current American political imbroglio?

Dr. Herb Silverman: You ask how we can talk to Christian fundamentalists when their worldview is so different from ours and they don’t accept evidence. I’ve found that we can’t reason people out of a belief that they didn’t come to through reason, but we still might be able to find some points of agreement.

For instance, I might start with “Love your neighbor,” and point out varieties of the Golden Rule from Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, and Confucianism that predate Jesus. Another thing we could probably agree on is that all other faiths are wrong. I do say that every educated person should read the Bible, because it’s an important part of our culture. I also mention some secular books worth reading. If I’m asked for biblical quotes I like, I can mention Matthew 7:16: “By your fruits you shall know them.” I also like John 8:32: “The truth will set you free,” which it did when I became an atheist. If they tell me that they support blasphemy laws, I say I might, too, if the offended deity personally files charges.

It helps in discussions with Christian fundamentalists to treat them with kindness and respect. We should assume that they believe what they say, even if it sounds like nonsense. I ignore personal attacks and stick with the issues. Usually the best I can hope for in talking to committed Christian fundamentalists is that some of their stereotypes about atheists will change and they will think I’m a nice guy with a sense of humor (even though I’m going to hell). Since I came to atheism by following what I consider to be a sensible evidence-based path, it doesn’t much

matter to me whether others adopt my position, but I understand why it's important for Christian fundamentalists to try to convert me: Eternal life is at stake. And for many of them, that's more important than life itself. I find such a worldview odd at best.

That worldview can also be dangerous if conversion is forced on others. This brings us to your question about women's bodies. The Bible was written thousands of years ago by misogynistic men. The punishment for a man who raped a virgin woman was that the man should pay her father 50 shekels and that she must marry her rapist because she is now damaged goods (Deut. 22:28). There are also passages in the Christian Bible about women not having authority over a man, that the man is head of the household, that women are created for man, and much more. Some Christians live this way, but have been unsuccessful in making it the law of our land. Unfortunately, they have been somewhat successful promoting their political issues. This includes in some places denying women contraceptives and the right to choose. Though the Bible is silent on abortion, preventing women from having this right has become the top issue for Christian fundamentalists, who also try to pass biblically-based laws against LGBT rights.

You asked about religious colleges and universities in the United States. There are many throughout the nation. In my home state of South Carolina, Furman University was founded in 1826 as a Baptist university, but has become more diverse, not requiring students or faculty to hold specific religious views. In 1992, Furman separated from the Southern Baptist Convention in order to exert more control over their institution. On the other hand, in Charleston, my home city, Charleston Southern University (formerly called Baptist College) is decidedly Christian, where it integrates faith with learning, and is in good standing with the Southern Baptist Convention. Its faculty are required to sign an oath of belief. In 2004, I debated a professor from that institution on the existence of God, though the debate was not allowed on their campus. The professor later invited me to speak to his class, but the invitation was rescinded because his administration refused to allow me on campus. So much for academic freedom.

Many religious schools have decent academic programs, but quite a few don't. Even worse, some have political agendas, including the well-known Liberty University in Lynchburg, Virginia. Its president, Jerry Falwell Jr., considers it immoral for evangelicals to not support President Trump, adding that Trump could do nothing to lose his support.

I'll close with some questions I get from Christian fundamentalists, along with my answers.

Why do you hate God? I don't hate God any more than I hate the Tooth Fairy, and I didn't become an atheist because something bad happened to me. I became an atheist because I find no evidence for any gods.

What is the purpose of life? I don't need to believe in a god to find a purpose. There may not be a purpose of life, but we can find many purposes *in* life.

Why be moral? Personal responsibility is a good conservative principle. We should not give credit to a deity for our accomplishments or blame satanic forces when we behave badly. We should take personal responsibility for our actions. I try to live my life to its fullest — it's the only life I have, and I hope to make a positive difference because it's the right thing to do, not because of future rewards or punishment.

Why do you think science is more reliable than religion? Because we know how to distinguish good scientific ideas from bad ones. Scientists start out not knowing the answer and go wherever the evidence leads them. Science relies on experimenting, testing, and questioning assumptions critically until a consensus is reached, and even that is always open to revision in light of later evidence. This is why scientific truths are the same in Saudi Arabia, the United States, Israel, and India — countries with very different religious beliefs.

Don't you worry that Heaven and Hell might be real and that you will be going to Hell? Here are questions I have for you about Heaven and Hell. Why is faith not only important, but perhaps the deciding factor about who winds up in Heaven or Hell? What moral purpose does eternal torture serve? If we have free will on Earth, will we have free will in Heaven? If so, might we sin and go from Heaven to Hell? If not, will we be heavenly robots? If God can make us sinless in Heaven, why didn't he create us sinless on Earth? Can you be blissfully happy in Heaven knowing that some of your loved ones are being tortured in Hell? And what do you do for an eternity in Heaven without getting bored? Wouldn't a loving God who wants us all to go to Heaven make it unambiguously clear how to get there?

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 14 – Constitutionally Wrought Freethought

2019/12/17

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored *Complex variables* (1975), *Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt* (2012) and *An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt* (2017). He co-authored *The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America* (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, *Complex Variables with Applications* (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and *Short Reflections on Secularism* (2019).

Here we talk about the American Constitution.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: When we look at the well-made human document called the *American Constitution*, some questions arise for the freethought community, potentially, or, at least, some in it. What parts before amendments best exemplify freethought and secularism? What amendments improve upon the original document in terms of the specific content of secularism and the freethinking ability of individual citizens?

Dr. Herb Silverman: The framers of the United States Constitution wanted no part of the religious intolerance, holy wars, and bloodshed they saw in Europe. In declaring independence from England, Americans also rejected the claim by kings, crowned by bishops, that they had been vested with a God-given authority to rule through “divine right.”

The U.S. framers wisely established the first government in history to separate religion and government. They formed a *secular nation* whose authority rests with “We the People” (the first three words of the U.S. Constitution) and not with “Thou the Deity.” They created a Constitution in which the government acknowledged no gods, the better to ensure freedom of conscience. We the people are free to worship one, many, or no gods. As Thomas Jefferson said, “It does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

There are only two references to religion in the U.S. Constitution, and both are exclusionary. One is in Article 6: “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” I know Article 6 quite well. When I discovered in 1990 that our South Carolina state constitution prohibited atheists from holding public office, an obvious violation of Article 6, I challenged that provision in the state constitution by running for governor as “the candidate without a prayer.” In 1997 I won a unanimous decision in the South Carolina Supreme Court, invalidating the unconstitutional provision and recognizing that atheists have the right to hold public office in South Carolina.

The other exclusionary mention of religion is in the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This guarantees the right to practice any religion or no religion. The federal

government cannot favor one religion over another, or believers over non-believers. No one's religious liberty is threatened when the wall of separation between religion and government is kept strong.

As wonderful as the U.S. Constitution is, no American would call it an infallible document, as some claim about the Bible. The framers understood the need for future changes in the Constitution, and set forth mechanisms for change through amendments. Scientific and humanistic advances make it desirable to incorporate new information and adjust our worldview and behavior. The Constitution condoned slavery until the 13th Amendment ended it in 1865. Women were not granted the right to vote until 1920 when the 19th Amendment passed. On the other hand, the unamended Bible written by misogynistic men condones slavery. You will also not find any support in the Bible for respecting people who have different or no religious beliefs.

While the U.S. federal government was never considered to be a *Christian* nation, initially there was no prohibition against states establishing their own state churches. Some early state constitutions limited public office to Christians—or even to the *correct* Christian denomination. Such provisions represented a more intolerant time in our history. States with government-favored religions gradually began moving toward separating religion and government. The 14th Amendment, passed in 1868, ended state-sponsored religion.

Those who claim the United States is a Christian nation need to read the Constitution. You will not find the words Christian, Jesus, or God in it. Our framers were careful and thoughtful writers. Had they wanted a Christian nation, it seems highly unlikely that they would somehow have forgotten to include their Christian intentions in the supreme law of the land. In 1797, the Treaty of Tripoli was ratified unanimously by the United States Senate. This trade treaty stated in part: “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” I wonder what part of “not” those who believe we are a Christian nation don’t understand.

Nevertheless, Christian-nation advocates continually try chipping away the “secular,” often with symbols like “In God We Trust” and “One Nation Under God.” They also try to legislate the posting of the Ten Commandments on public buildings. Most Americans believe that the Ten Commandments are among the finest guidelines for a virtuous life. Interestingly, hardly anyone can actually state them all. So I will, along with my commentary.

The First Commandment, “Thou shalt have no other gods before me,” conflicts with the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution that guarantees freedom of religion—the right to worship one, several, or no gods. The next three Commandments (no graven images, not taking God’s name in vain, keeping the Sabbath day holy) refer to specific kinds of worship directed toward a God who punishes several generations of children if their fathers do not worship appropriately. These first four commandments are religious edicts that have nothing to do with moral or ethical behavior. They describe how to worship and pay homage to a jealous and vindictive God.

The Fifth Commandment, about honoring parents, should not be so unconditional as to condone child abuse. There is no commandment about parents honoring their children or treating them humanely.

The next four commandments (proscriptions against murder, adultery, stealing, and lying) obviously have merit, and existed in cultures long before these commandments appeared in Exodus 20. Yet even these are open to interpretation. Is abortion murder? What about euthanasia? War? Capital punishment? Reasonable people can disagree and respect other opinions, unless convinced they are acting as God's messenger.

The Tenth Commandment, "Thou shalt not covet thy neighbor's house, wife, slaves, ox, donkey, or any other property," condones slavery and treating women as property.

The Ten Commandments, meant to be the cornerstone of an ethical and moral life, are notable for what they omit. Why not condemn slavery, racism, sexual assault, child and spouse abuse, and torture? Most people could come up with a better set of rules to live by.

I propose a simple solution that both honors our democratic principles and reminds us of the curbs on governmental abuse of power. Why don't we display our American Bill of Rights on public buildings? We would still be posting ten, and we Americans can all support and celebrate these ten. Or can we?

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

Philosophical and Historical Foundations of American Secularism 15 – Scientific Skepticism and the Emergence of Modern Secularism

2019/12/25

Dr. Herb Silverman is the Founder of the Secular Coalition for America, the Founder of the Secular Humanists of the Lowcountry, and the Founder of the Atheist/Humanist Alliance student group at the College of Charleston. He authored [Complex variables](#) (1975), [Candidate Without a Prayer: An Autobiography of a Jewish Atheist in the Bible Belt](#) (2012) and [An Atheist Stranger in a Strange Religious Land: Selected Writings from the Bible Belt](#) (2017). He co-authored [The Fundamentals of Extremism: The Christian Right in America](#) (2003) with Kimberley Blaker and Edward S. Buckner, [Complex Variables with Applications](#) (2007) with Saminathan Ponnusamy, and [Short Reflections on Secularism](#) (2019).

Here we talk about scientific skepticism and modern secularism.

Scott Douglas Jacobsen: Some of the pillars of American freethought have been individuals including H.L. Mencken, Carl Sagan, Paul Kurtz, or Martin Gardner, or in the everyday world of needed problem-solving in *Parade Magazine* with Marilyn (Mach) Vos Savant.

Whether in the acerbic and sardonic writings of Mencken or in the ordinary American household language of Vos Savant, the wide-ranging philosophizing by Gardner or Kurtz, or the popularization of advanced scientific concepts to a lay audience in the case of Sagan, a delivery of wide-ranging scientific skepticism as a retort to the wide-spread irrationalism in American life.

How have some of the larger figures of American scientific skepticism been helpful in providing another area of critical thinking for the public against common supernaturalisms? How have those, in turn, helped the cause of furtherance of secularism in the United States?

Dr. Herb Silverman: You mention famous American freethought individuals, some of whom might be acerbic, sardonic, read by ordinary Americans, philosophers, popularizers of science, or debunkers of irrationalism. I think all such people are useful to a freethought movement because they often represent different constituencies. I'm a "big tent" atheist who welcomes all to come out of their atheist closets to help normalize freethought in America.

I'll describe my personal journey to atheism with four examples.

As a youngster, I was influenced by the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, where the gatekeeper told Dorothy that nobody had ever seen the great Wizard. Dorothy replied, "Then how do you know he exists?" The curtain is later pulled back to reveal that the "Wizard" is an elderly man operating machinery and speaking into a microphone. So the Wizard didn't exist, and Dorothy was on her own. That sounded to me a lot like what I was beginning to think of God.

I was also influenced by the Bible. I "knew" as a trusting child that the Bible was God's word. But after many of my biblical questions went unanswered, I became an example of what Isaac Asimov observed, "Properly read, the Bible is the most potent force for atheism ever conceived."

At age 16, in 1958, I hadn't told anyone that I no longer believed in God, thinking I might be the only one in this country with that opinion. Then I discovered Bertrand Russell's *Why I Am Not a Christian* in the public library. I felt better about myself after learning that Russell was more than just not a Christian. He was as many "nots" as I was, and brave enough to say so. Russell transformed the lives of many in my generation. For the first time we heard articulate arguments that confirmed and gave voice to our own skepticism and doubts. Even some true believers were led on a thoughtful journey toward altered religious states. Learning that Russell was a logician and mathematician at least partially inspired me to become a mathematician.

When I read George Orwell's *1984*, I thought the character "Big Brother" appeared to be an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, authoritarian figure who demanded absolute obedience. I didn't know at the time that Orwell was an atheist. Here's what Orwell said about Big Brother: "In *1984*, the concept of Big Brother is a parody of God. You never see him, but the fact of him is drilled into people's minds so that they become robots, almost. Plus, if you speak bad against Big Brother, it's a Thoughtcrime."

You also asked why there might now be more critical thinkers in America, helping to further the cause of secularism in the United States.

In "The Last Taboo: Why America Needs Atheism," published in the *New Republic* in 1996, Wendy Kaminer wrote, "Atheists generate about as much sympathy as pedophiles. But, while pedophilia may at least be characterized as a disease, atheism is a choice, a willful rejection of beliefs to which vast majorities of people cling." I have one slight disagreement: Atheism is not a "choice." For me, the only choice is whether to be open about my atheism or pretend to believe in a deity for which there is not a scintilla of evidence.

The situation in the United States has improved significantly since Kaminer's piece appeared twenty-three years ago. Much has been written about atheism, including best-selling books by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Susan Jacoby, and others. A number of popular blogs now promote atheism and secularism. In the Internet age, people hear about many worldviews, not just the one in which they were raised. Every new national survey shows a rapid increase of atheists, agnostics, and those who claim no religious affiliation (called "nones"). Many "nones" broke from conservative religion because it is anti-LGBTQ, anti-women's rights, and anti-science. Pedophilia has also discouraged people from maintaining their church affiliation.

Fivethirtyeight, which takes its name from the number of electors in the U.S. electoral college, is a website that focuses on opinion poll analysis. A recent piece, "Millennials Are Leaving Religion and Not Coming Back," pointed out that 40 percent of millennials are religiously unaffiliated. And there's mounting evidence that today's younger generations may be leaving religion for good. Changing views about the relationship between morality and religion also appear to have convinced many young parents that religious institutions are simply irrelevant or unnecessary for their children. A majority (57 percent) of millennials agree that religious people are generally less tolerant of others, compared to only 37 percent of Baby Boomers.

The Christian conservative movement warns about a rising tide of secularism, but the strong association between religion and the Republican Party may be fueling this divide. And as more members of the Democratic Party become secular, the rift between secular liberals and religious conservatives will be exacerbated. I'm hoping we will return to the day when Republicans identify as economic conservatives who want less government interference, rather than identify with the Christian religion as so many now do. I would still be a Democrat, but at least I'd understand that the Republican Party had a legitimate point-of-view.

When it comes to voting, 60 percent of Americans say they prefer a candidate who believes in God and only 6% say they prefer a candidate who doesn't. However, this preference for candidates who believe in God nearly disappears when policy positions are included in the question. The percent who say they would vote for a well-qualified atheist has steadily risen from 18 percent in 1958 to 58 percent in 2015. The Congressional Freethought Caucus, formed in 2018 with 4 members, is a forum for secular members of Congress who promote evidence-based public policy. It now has 12 open members, with more likely to join. There are also more than 50 state legislators who identify with the atheist and humanist community.

While our community is growing rapidly, we are still severely underrepresented in politics. We need to encourage more members of our freethought community to run for public office, and also encourage elected officials to acknowledge their nonbelief. Here are some of our important issues: protecting a strict separation of religion and government, addressing climate change, advancing human rights and civil liberties (including disparities in incarceration rates, easy access to register to vote, women's rights), health and safety (vaccines, death with dignity), and promoting religious freedom abroad (opposing blasphemy and apostasy laws). We need our atheist and humanist community to become more visible and welcomed by participants in the electoral arena. I hope for a day when every political party at every governmental level will embrace our constituency.

Jacobsen: Thank you for the opportunity and your time, Dr. Silverman.

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Author Biography



Scott Douglas Jacobsen is a Canadian author, interviewer, and publisher, and a board member and executive on numerous boards whose contributions to secularism, humanism, and human-rights discourse are distinguished by their rigour and accessibility. He established In-Sight Publishing in 2014 to produce freely available or low-cost e-books and periodicals under a Creative Commons license, thereby ensuring broad dissemination while safeguarding intellectual property.

As editor-in-chief of *In-Sight: Interviews* (ISSN 2369-6885), launched in 2012, Jacobsen curates and presents meticulously prepared, long-form dialogues with a wide range of interlocutors. These

interviews include scientists and philosophers, activists and public intellectuals, addressing themes such as secular ethics, freedom of expression, evidence-based policymaking, and the global defence of human rights. His work appears regularly in peer-recognized outlets, including *The Good Men Project*, *International Policy Digest* (ISSN: 2332-9416), *The Humanist* (Print: ISSN 0018-7399; Online: ISSN 2163-3576), Basic Income Earth Network (UK Registered Charity 1177066), *A Further Inquiry*, Canadian Humanist Publications (CA Registered Charity 118833284 RR 0001), *Uncommon Ground Media* (UK Registration 11836548), The New Enlightenment Project, *News Intervention*, *Canadian Atheist*, Trusted Clothes (CN: 9562184; BN: 791402928RC0001), among dozens of others.

Jacobsen engages globally and interdisciplinarily with issues of social justice, belief plurality, and economic equity. Jacobsen has held the Tobis Fellowship in Research at the University of California, Irvine, on multiple occasions, contributing to empirical and normative studies on ethics and public discourse. He maintains active membership in numerous professional media organizations, fostering adherence to editorial standards and facilitating ongoing intellectual exchange.

His editorial leadership and commitment to open-access formats have generated a substantial, publicly accessible archive—known as the Jacobsen Bank—that documents contemporary secular and humanist thought. Based in British Columbia, he continues to expand the reach of his platforms, amplifying diverse perspectives and promoting evidence-based dialogue across cultural and disciplinary boundaries.

