

Different Drummers

Nonconforming Thinkers in History

Teacher Resource Section

Freethought and Religious Liberty: A Primer for Teachers

PDF Version 1.0

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Sacramento, California

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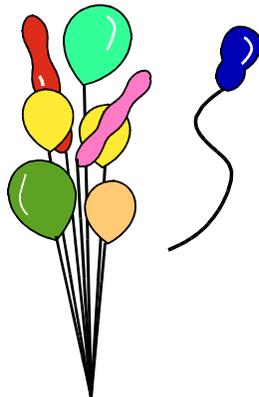
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Freethought



and Religious Liberty

— A Primer for Teachers

Freethinkers



*—humankind's nonconformers
in thought and mind.*



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Acknowledgments

This monograph draws heavily on the work of Dr. Gerald A. Larue, Emeritus Professor of Biblical History and Archaeology at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, and author of *Freethought Across the Centuries* (1996), a 516-page textbook designed for use in comparative religion courses.

Professor Larue's definitions of freethinking, along with several of the categories of freethinkers he presents in his book, inform the textual presentation in the early portions of the booklet. With his blessing, we purposefully incorporate his eloquent wording whenever it suits, and we rely extensively on material in his book for our identification of the varied contributions of freethinkers to human progress. The monograph section titled "Religion in a Free Society" excerpts directly from Dr. Larue's text portions of his discussion of freethinking as it relates to religious liberty. We gratefully acknowledge the extensive contributions by Professor Larue.

Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert
Instructional Systems

Foreword

It is clear that many teachers, while freely acknowledging the role of *religion* in historical events, often unwittingly omit from their consideration an important conception—*freethought*. Although most often viewed as a counterpoint to religion, freethinking is in some senses its conceptual counterpart. Across the ages, freethought has taken varied forms, as has religion. Freethought has made contributions, as has religion. In teaching about religion’s role in history and culture, one needs to consider not only the religious outlook but also its historic complement.

Freethinking has played a notable role in cultural movements and in human progress (it was an especially significant player in United States history), yet school textbooks are written with scant reference to its contributions. Of course, publishers of these books simply ensure that their authors follow the guidance of large states such as California and Texas.

California’s Department of Education, in its *History/Social Studies Framework (K-12, 1988; 1997, p. 7)* mandates “teaching about religion” in the history curriculum. It asserts that “...many of our political institutions have their antecedents in religious beliefs.” What this rationale *omits* is the historical fact that *many major changes in society and societal institutions have their antecedents in various beliefs of nonreligious or even anti-religious freethinkers*.

The omission of freethought from such an important guiding document for curricular integrity is hardly innocuous. “Separation of church and state” is the *only* specifically cited principle that the California *Framework* offers as its prime example of an important political arrangement developed from historical antecedents. Ironically, this particular feature of United States governance is the fruit of European Enlightenment thinking. And Enlightenment reasoning is exemplified by freethinking.

It can be correctly argued that the principle of church/state separation that the California *Framework* hails owes its existence far more to freethinking than to religious beliefs!

Propelled in large part *by* freethinkers, the movement to make the American form of government secular in character involved a hearty dose of belief in rationalism, a firm commitment to individual rights, and an allegiance to science, rather than faith in any religious tenet. To mandate teaching about the precepts of religions in California schools but *not* about the nature of contrasting freethought rubric provides students with an incomplete and inaccurate perspective on history. The background information in this “primer” will help teachers to factually address the topic of freethought and thereby enhance their capacity to conduct their teaching about religion with the requisite objectivity and fairness.

John B. Massen, Founder and Coordinator of OABITAR

Preface

At present there are efforts astride to fortify and expand the place of religion in the public school curriculum. Religion's relevance to some aspects of *certain* subject areas, such as history, social studies, art, and literature is not to be doubted. History and social science teachers, for example, will readily acknowledge the pertinence of religion to their discipline. These same teachers will acknowledge, however, the several challenges involved in teaching about this domain.

Classroom teachers are generally cognizant of their obligation to teach about religion in an intellectually fair and objective manner. They know that, as educators in public schools, their teaching must be conducted with impartiality and factual empathy. Yet while they accept their responsibility for academic honesty in the depiction of religious issues, they often inadvertently exclude from their teaching the concept of freethought.

It is a fundamental and inalienable right for citizens to give credence to any faith or to none at all. Educators play a central role in perpetuating this right to *freedom of conscience* for everyone. *Public* school instruction in the religion realm must be *neutral* toward the various religions and nonreligion. To appropriately deal with the complete spectrum of religious diversity as subject matter, adequate curricular consideration of the concept of freethinking is necessary. The nonreligion counterpart of religious belief is freethought.

In America's pluralistic society, religious liberty is our shared political vision for *every* citizen—believers and freethinkers alike. This monograph is designed to provide information and guidance to educators who are seeking to respond to an ethical necessity *to teach about freethinking* so as to teach more successfully and *justly* about religion.



Freethought and Religious Liberty

A Primer for Teachers

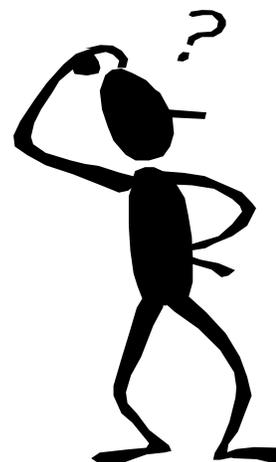
Introduction

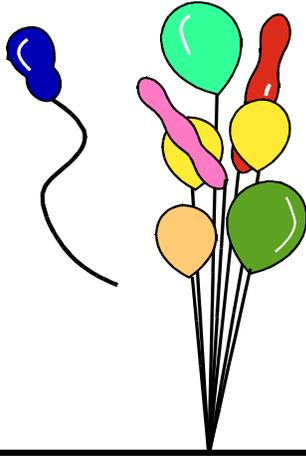
Each individual seems to seek a personal understanding of the meaning and purpose of life and living. Most people derive answers to such inquiries about human life from fellow human beings and from their cultural surroundings, particularly from religion. Many take another route—the path of *freethinking*.

The enduring human quest for meaning has, throughout history, led many persons to depart from the prevailing societal conception of “truth” offered them in their day. These *freethinkers* have independently pursued the quest for meaning and reached their own determinations. By way of their mental faculties and independent reasoning, they reach autonomous conclusions concerning the prevalent “religious truths” of the time and place into which they are born.

- By what routes do these *freethinkers* unshackle themselves from cultural authority and tradition and reach their *own* interpretations of life purpose and conscience?
- How does society respond through its political and religious institutions to such individuals?
- Of what relevance is this in the United States?

This primer will briefly probe these questions.



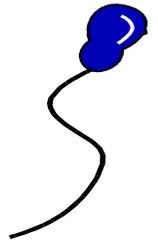


Examining the Freethought Pathway

Whether seen in history or in modern times, freethinkers are humankind's *nonconformers* of thought and mind, particularly in the domain of religious beliefs. Freethinkers reach and hold to conclusions based on their own mental reasoning, even though all others around them may think otherwise.

The term "freethought" came into existence in England toward the end of the seventeenth century, and the Oxford Dictionary notes that especially the deistic and other rejecters of Christianity claimed the "freethinker" designation at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The contemporary American conception is represented by the Webster's definition.

A "Freethinker" Defined	
<i>Oxford English Dictionary</i>	one who refuses to submit his reason to the control of authority in the matters of religious belief
<i>Webster's New Collegiate</i>	one that forms opinions on the basis of reason independently of authority, <i>esp</i> : one who doubts or denies religious dogma



A freethinker's inquiring spirit and unorthodox manner of thinking about such matters as "meaning of life" and "ultimate truths" need not call forth any particular *conduct* on the freethinker's part. As with religious belief, the degree to which any one person evidences his or her personal tenets in behavior is highly varied.

History records varied responses of freethinking individuals to their society and times. Some freethinkers, skeptical of a dominant view, expressed their doubts openly. Others rejected or attempted to upset specific assertions. Still others cast off what they may have at one time considered a firm foundation of faith in the conventional God or gods held by most of their fellow travelers in time. But of course history is not likely to note those freethinkers who kept their unconventional outlook to themselves and did not make known their nonconforming views by way of "notorious" actions. Far more likely to receive history's mention are those persons who, when reaching a different conclusion about some question, then pitted their wit and beliefs against preponderant authority and customary convictions.

On the Lookout for Freethought

One can find many historical examples of men and women who inquired into the claims and tenets of their government or church and, as a result of their queries, grew to challenge prevalent doctrines. It was their questioning or seeking of alternative explanations or similar intellectual activity that led them to reach and hold judgments of their own. Characterizing freethought in its broadest sense, we can locate the freethinkers across time by looking for “*people who reach judgments via critical thinking and independent reasoning distinct from or despite preponderant authority and tradition.*”

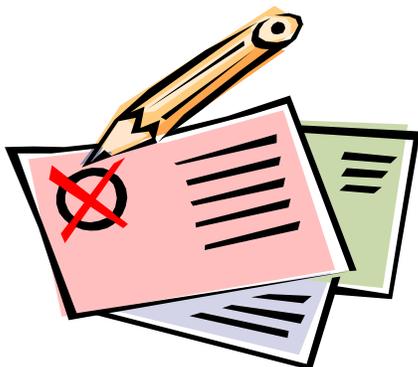


Seen in this light, Martin Luther, a key figure in the Protestant Reformation, was in some sense a freethinker. He was certainly an *independent* or *autonomous* thinker whose intellectual activity led him into a position of nonconformity. Luther was an educated Catholic monk, profoundly influenced by Christian humanistic thinking, and deeply disturbed by what was then occurring within Roman Catholicism. After much independent thought and judgment, he posted ninety-five propositions on the door of his church in Wittenberg. The statements were designed to reform the church from within. Instead, his actions triggered the church’s condemnation and his own excommunication, and led to the Protestant movement now known as the Reformation.

Today’s freethinkers—coming as they do after the Age of Enlightenment, the development of modern science and the stirring events of the recent century—are likely to maintain that any thesis is open to challenge and can be accepted or rejected on the grounds of reasoning and scientific examination and according to its impact on human welfare and liberty.

Evolving Conceptions of a “Free Thinking” Person	
<i>Over the Ages</i>	one who reaches judgments based on critical thinking and independent reasoning irrespective of prevailing authority and tradition
<i>Modern Times</i> (Larue)	one holding that any assertion is subject to challenge and can be accepted or rejected on the basis of logic, reason and scientific investigation, and on the basis of its effect on human well-being and human freedom

What Freethought is NOT



Freethinking does not equate to loose speculation. It is more akin to scientific method. The thinking demands discipline and careful evaluation, along with openness to new information likely to change one’s views.

Neither does freethinking equate to rabble rousing. One may have a number of freethinking friends who would not consider making their views known publicly.

A freethinker does not embrace what has been said in the past simply because it is “old” or “revered.” Neither does he or she accept what is said merely because others do so or because authority “endorses” it. Rather, the freethinker uses conjecture based on reason, logic, analysis, and testing to

reach his or her understanding. A freethinker may be cognizant and appreciative of the claims of tradition without accepting those claims. Freethought may place its practitioner into a minority stance in a milieu of firmly held religious beliefs. Depending on the existing civil structure, this may prove a precarious position for the individual.

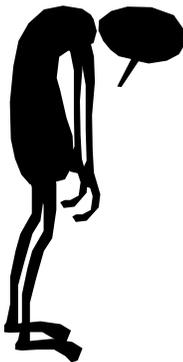
Embracing freethought is not simply separating from the mainstream of belief. Rather, it demands a type of thinking and responding that grants to all their freedom to be different. Freethought reasoning is not accompanied by an appetite for bringing others' beliefs into conformity with it. A freethinker does not seek to reduce others' intellectual or social freedoms. Freethinkers *represent* individual intellectual freedom. It is more in character for a freethinker to permit, and perhaps even to enlarge, comparable freedom for others.

Freethinkers do not seek authority to impose their logic and conclusions on society, even while strongly advocating their position. This distinction is a critical one, because *how* a person uses his or her critical thinking and independent reasoning when challenging existing authority and/or social values has important implications for others in society. Adolph Hitler, for example, might display critical thinking and independent reasoning leading from his milieu to *Mein Kampf*, but he could not be classified a freethinker since it was his intention to limit (actually, to eliminate) individual thought and freedom.

One consequence of a freethinker espousing an independent outlook may be more diversity (less homogeneity of overall viewpoint) within whatever society he or she dwells. On the other hand, history offers examples of freethought reasoning being adopted by and growing to permeate a society.

Freethinkers in Context

The responses of the cultural and religious establishment to persons who deviate from tradition have been varied. Custom and authority sometimes press hard for acceptance and compliance. A broadminded society may indulge its freethinkers; other societies will not.



Freethinking in some political contexts may result in shunning, or even in persecution and death. Recent history provides one dramatic example. In 1989 the author Salman Rushdie published a volume titled *The Satanic Verses*. He was almost immediately threatened with death by fundamentalist elements of the Muslim religion, which found his writing distasteful, blasphemous, and heretical. The leading ayatollah in Iran offered a \$3 million reward for Rushdie's death. In response to the threat, Rushdie and his family went into hiding. British authorities broke relations with Iran and took steps to protect him. Rushdie remained under a death threat for nine years.



Even if not pursued or persecuted, nonconformers to conventional belief are in the position of confronting the prevailing views and the predominant authority surrounding them. They may be rejected by segments of society or somewhat shunted to the margins of public life. For example, in the U.S., the prevalent view is that "a God is in charge." But, freethinking persons who are skeptics, deists, atheists, or secular humanists must have

concluded otherwise, and their reasoning presents a challenge to the strength of the common notion. As a result, any of these assorted “nonbelievers” may suffer some degree of civil censure for a seeming insolence to societal authority and tradition. For them, there will be strong cultural pressure to conform—in avowal, at least, if not in true conscience—because the majority society views a *disbeliever* as a *misbeliever* (heretic).

The social inducement for an American to declare *some* form of creed—or at least, agnosticism—over *nonbelief* is strong. Citizens who think that they can, *without consequence*, go merrily along their way in life without holding to or believing in any God or gods are likely to be disappointed. Take the situation of someone openly atheist. Due to prejudice, it is unlikely this person will ever be elected or admitted to public service. And, despite the Federal Constitution’s prohibition in Article VI of a religious test for public office, a few states still unconstitutionally exclude such a citizen—no matter how upright and law abiding—from public office. That person’s nonconforming idea is simply *too far* from conventional thinking. It is “out of bounds”—taboo.

Despite much progress, this is the situation in many other democratic countries as well. In the present century, few political surroundings offer freethinkers the real freedom to be different and to express themselves fully without fear of reprisal from mainstream society. More typically, a person’s actions and outcomes must heed authority, which demands acquiescence and adherence.

What about the reverse situation, the influence of one person’s freethinking on the surrounding society? History shows the impact can vary widely, depending on the era and environment into which the person is born and within which his or her life is spent. One individual’s probing and questioning and reasoning and challenging may cause hardly a ripple in the culture. In times such as the Enlightenment, however, it may place a person on the cutting edge and in the forefront of heady times that make an enduring mark on history and advance human progress for all.

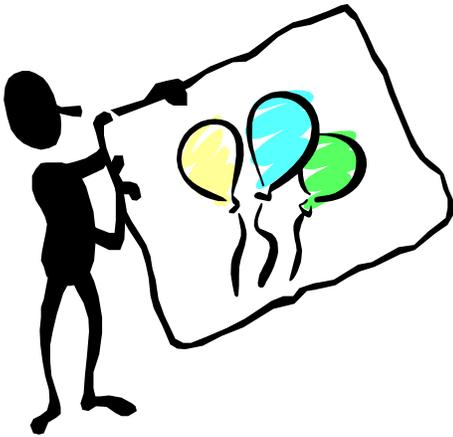
Freethought’s Contributions



We are oftentimes well aware of what some historical freethinker has bestowed on our own heritage. For example, we know that deists such as Thomas Paine, George Washington, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were active in the writing and implementation of humanistic concepts expressed through our national constitution, with its strong features that preserve the concept of individual rights. What we may not be cognizant of, however, is the extent to which their nonconforming freethought beliefs related to and resulted in the contributions for which we remember them. The relationship may be substantial, but has remained unreported or ignored, or has been diminished as history has been reinterpreted and presented to succeeding generations.

As the examples in the table on the next page reveal, freethought ideas and actions have been responsible for some great leaps of social progress.

Some Social Leaps as a Result of Freethinking	
<i>Freethinker</i>	<i>Contribution</i>
<i>Hippocrates</i>	based his work on objective observation and deductive reasoning, and established the concept of rationality in place of faith
<i>Socrates</i>	developed and taught the Socratic method, which provided a pattern of free inquiry that ensured resistance to dogmatism because it questioned tenets, beliefs, and principles
<i>Aristotle</i>	profoundly influenced the Western world with philosophy that followed empirical observation and logic as the essential methods of rational inquiry
<i>Martin Luther</i>	broke with the authority and dogma of the Church of Rome and initiated the rise of Protestantism
<i>Rene Descartes</i>	provided the concept that the method of doubt causes the acquisition of knowledge
<i>Nicolaus Copernicus</i>	challenged the religiously supported belief that the sun went around the earth, arguing that observation showed the earth and planets to be revolving about the sun
<i>Galileo Galilei</i>	corroborated Copernicus's theory, stating "we ought not to begin at the authority of ... Scripture; but at sensible experiments and necessary demonstrations." Established that science should answer science questions
<i>Isaac Newton</i>	proposed that reason was the key to understanding the universe, and that with understanding, human problems could be solved by humans, and humans were the master of their own fate
<i>Charles Darwin</i>	published the theory of evolution and revolutionized thought concerning the origins of the human race
<i>Thomas Paine</i>	published <i>The Age of Reason</i> and evaluated the Bible from the point of view of a freethinker and rational deist
<i>Thomas Jefferson</i>	clearly disassociated the secular and the sectarian aspects of authority for the United States, writing as follows; "the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect a wall of separation between church and state"



Categories of Freethinkers

Freethinkers on the whole tend to place their bets that humans, not gods, are the actors on life's stage, and thus people are responsible for the good and bad things that happen on earth. That is, the natural world and humanity's place in that natural world is the focus of their intellect and convictions. There is no looking to the supernatural to solve problems.

This section surveys various categories of freethinkers and characterizes the essential nature of the underlying reasoning by which a person so grouped stays free of conventional religious thinking. These categories are *not* mutually exclusive. Rather, they are overlapping, in that some combination of reasoning is more often than not the case for any single individual. One person's thinking, for example, may be that of an atheist *and* naturalist *and* secular humanist with no contradiction or interference.

The Skeptics

Perhaps the oldest classification of freethinker is that of the **skeptics**. (The ancient Greek term *skeptikos* simply meant "to inquire, to examine, to consider.") Skeptics are those who question, who doubt, who challenge the claims of factuality in accepted beliefs and faith statements. When you make an assertion of truth, you can depend on any skeptics in your audience to seek clarity in definition, consistency in logic, and adequacy of evidence for whatever it is you say.

In ancient times a skeptic would be willing to examine *any* assertion of truth, but modern skeptics are not systematic in the ancient sense (of Pyrrho of Greece) because they trust scientific research and action based on research findings. They will disbelieve what science has demonstrated to be false, and they will suspend judgment concerning whatever has not been checked.

One can perhaps best characterize present-day skepticism as "methodological." Today's skeptics insist that *claims of factuality, both religious and nonreligious, must be tested by reason employing the rules of logic, and by the best tools of scientific investigation*. They will believe, at least temporarily, whatever has passed the requisite tests, and they will willingly give up whatever beliefs prove groundless.



According to philosopher Mario Bunge, a skeptic will hold “...that it is foolish, imprudent, and morally wrong to announce, practice, or preach important ideas or practices that have been shown in a conclusive manner to be utterly false, inefficient or harmful. (Note the restriction to *important* beliefs; by definition, trivialities are harmless even when false.)”¹

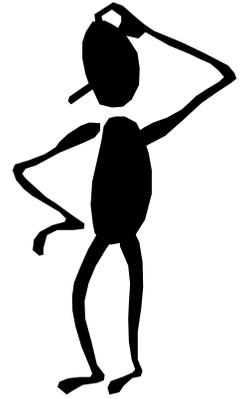
The Agnostics

A second freethinker category consists of **agnostics**. Thomas Huxley coined the term *agnostic* in the late 19th century. It is formed from two Greek words: the root *gnosis* meaning “knowledge” and the prefix *a* meaning “without.” Agnostics are those who say, with regard to a given subject, “we are without knowledge concerning it.”

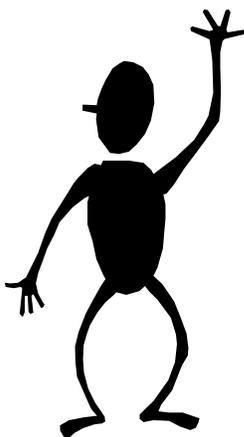
Huxley put his concept this way—“Positively, the principle (of agnosticism) may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively, in matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.”²

An agnostic, therefore, neither affirms nor denies the existence of God. Today’s agnostics will simply say that, despite all the arguments pro and con, one does not know, and perhaps cannot know whether or not there is a God. Thus the person claims the right, in the middle of strong social authority that there *is* a God, to conclude that *one cannot decide whether or not that claim is true*.

Agnostics do not acknowledge the presence or the reality of the supernatural, and so while their mental and scientific commitment is to agnosticism and open inquiry, in reality their way of life is hard to differentiate from atheism.



The Atheists



Literally, **atheists** are those “without any deity.” This label is formed from the Greek *theos* meaning “god” and the prefix *a* meaning “without.” Interestingly, in ancient times when Jupiter, Juno, and their assorted cadre were the dominant religion and monotheism was making inroads in the Roman Empire, it was the *Christians* who were called “the atheists” because they were “without the (Roman) gods.”

Characterization of the atheist as someone who is seeking to prove there is no God is ill suited to atheism today. Atheists are not concerned with disproving the claim that “God is.” Rather, atheists say that, *because there is no proof of God’s existence and no way to prove that God exists, we are therefore “without God” or “without a god.”*

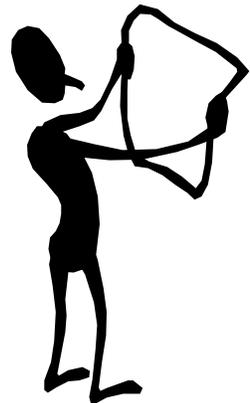
Atheists include *secularists* and *naturalists*, who base their attitudes, their thinking and their conclusions on scientific explanations of nature and whose life commitment is to the world of the human without acceptance of supernaturalism. The *materialists* represent another form of atheism. (Materialism in this sense is not to be confused with the different connotation for the term in popular speech—a desire for material things). The following briefly outlines the thinking behind these forms of atheism.

Philosophical Variants of Atheism (without a deity)	
 <p>Secularism</p>	focus is on secular issues, in particular on human well-being, using scientific outlook and no acceptance of supernaturalism in any form
<p>Naturalism</p> 	recognizes and stresses the affinity of the human and nature, viewing humans as a product of nature not above or apart from it; rejects dualism (body and soul) and any belief in an afterlife; having no doubt that, inasmuch as there are no non-natural objects, events or causes, all objects and events are to be accounted for scientifically and explained in terms of natural causes
<p>Materialism</p>	philosophy that physical matter in its modifications and movements is the only reality—all processes and phenomena (everything) in the universe are to be explained in terms of physical laws and as resulting from material agencies

The Deists

Like atheists, **deists** do not perceive a God around. But the deist does see evidence to suppose that the deity once was, whereas the atheist sees no such thing. Deists are those who *reason that the laws governing nature presuppose a supreme lawmaker or a God, but they neither seek to define that deity nor believe that this God is presently involved in nature.* (The Creator of the world and its natural laws takes no further part in their functioning.)

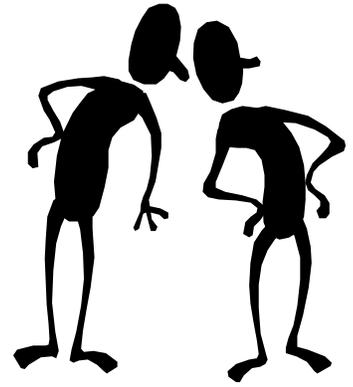
Since deists do have a form of god-belief (on purely rational grounds), are they “believers” or “freethinkers”? Actually deism represents a skepticism not far removed from agnosticism. Deists reject claims of supernatural revelation and place no reliance on doctrinal authority. Their life pattern is atheistic (without the deity) since, even as they discuss ethics, there is no acceptance of, or belief in, or appeal to, divinely revealed rules for ethical conduct. Some dictionaries follow their “deist: a believer in deism” entry with “SYN. *see* ATHEIST.”



There may not be as many deists in the United States now as there were in the days of the founding fathers, but deism remains an important category of freethought. (It is vital to historical understanding of Enlightenment thinking and development of the western world in the 17th and 18th centuries.) Some U.S. deists belong to organizations like the American Ethical Union, where the focus is on ethical growth and development.

The (Secular) Humanists

All the varieties of **humanists** are concerned with the human dimension and with the affairs of life on planet earth. There have long been *religious* humanists who look to religious teachings for the motivation and authority to act on behalf of others and for the rules to guide outreach to feed the poor, aid the sick, attend to the neglected, and so forth. The *secular* (or freethinking) humanists operate without reference to supernatural interference or direction.



Secular humanists accept no model for humanity outside the human condition as it can be seen in various historical situations. The motivation to benevolent actions of freethinkers is personal response to observed pain, loneliness, hunger and homelessness, etc. It is not a sense of duty to a divine or compliance with religious authority, but rather a human response to perceived need. Freethinking humanists do not place limitations on their areas of human concern due to scriptural teachings (e.g., excluding certain groups from beneficence).

Secular humanists regard themselves solely as the subject and agent of history and refuse all appeal to transcendence. Protestant theologian Paul Tillich⁵, when writing of religion in terms of “ultimate concern,” includes secularism: “For secularism is never without ultimate concern.”



Constitution, Art. VI, par. 3: "...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

First Amendment of the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."

Religion in a Free Society[†]

Our Founders created a *secular* government. The United States Constitution contains no reference whatever to the Deity. The original document's only reference to religion is in an exclusionary rather than endorsing context. This reference is the prohibition against religious tests as a qualification for public office (quoted above), at a time when eleven of the thirteen states had such tests for state officeholders.

With adoption of the Bill of Rights (the first ten Amendments to the Constitution) came a fortification of protection for personal liberties as well as a strengthening of state/church separation. The new guiding words about religion (see second paragraph quoted above) form the opening of the Federal Constitution's First Amendment. They comprise what is now known as the amendment's "establishment clause" and the "free exercise clause." Together these assertions, ratified in December 1791, would serve to define the realms of government and religion in the newly "united states." Together, they determined that the country would be constituted of a free people who could not be compelled to accept or to live by any given set of religious beliefs.

It was out of a combination of deism and reason that recognition of the importance of a free society had emerged in America by the time of the writing of the U.S. Constitution. The language of the First Amendment reflects the Founding Fathers' deep concerns for individual liberty. These concerns emanated from awareness of English and European edicts, which often had imposed on the general populace religious beliefs and interpretations of morality that had to be adhered to on pain of punishment.

According to historian Henry Steele Commager, the U.S. decision to separate church and state was "perhaps the most important decision reached in the New World. Everywhere in the western world of the eighteenth century, church and state were one; and everywhere the state maintained the established church and tried to force conformity to its dogma."⁴

Everywhere? No longer!

In the United States, an exception to the rule was in the making. Religion and government would *not* be one. Our forefathers' commitments to religious freedom had found full expression in the supreme law of the land. By way of a momentous declaration made in late 1791, our country commenced a significant journey.

[†] The first four pages of this section consist of extensive excerpts from Chapter 2 of *Freethought Across the Centuries*, by Gerald Larue. Amherst, NY: Humanist Press, 1996 (concentrating on pp. 11-17, with slight rearrangement of material)

State and Church: Together or Apart?



The study of American history makes it clear that those who came from Europe to what was, for Europeans, “the new world,” did not come religiously unencumbered. Nor did they always bring with them a religious tolerance that would admit the validity of other faith systems.

It is possible that those whose religious history included memories of persecution under tyrannical state-endorsed religious systems entertained some interest in supporting the formation of a governing system whereby no single religion could ever ally itself with government to enforce any single dogma. If they did, however, that concern was seldom evident. And, subsequent to the American Revolution, in the exciting times of moving toward new governmental structures for the victorious colonies, there were numerous efforts to unite state and religious concerns.

In June 1785, James Madison voiced strong opposition to a bill sponsored by Patrick Henry that would have placed a tax on all Virginians for the nondiscriminatory support of religion—that is; each taxpayer might designate the church to which his tax money would go. In Henry’s bill, the taxes of the nonreligious would be used to support secular education. Madison’s broadside, titled “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” was published in Alexandria, Virginia, and quickly spread. He wrote (excerpted):

Religion can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence. The religion, then, of every man, must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. In matters of religion no man’s right is abridged by the institution of civil society; and religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance.

Who does not see that the same authority that can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other religions, may establish, with the same ease, any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other sects? That the same authority that can call for each citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of only one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment, in all cases whatsoever?

James Madison has often been called, “Father of the United States Constitution.” He earned this appellation in considerable part because his strong views on the importance of separating church and state affairs carried forward into the Constitution’s Bill of Rights. To Madison, it was evident that religion and state must not be enmeshed. To do so would be a catastrophe for both.

As a consequence of the separation of state and church decision, Commager notes: “...the United States took the lead among the nations of the earth in the establishment of religious freedom. That is one reason America has never had any religious wars or religious persecutions.”⁴ Such events as witch trials and banishment for citizens could no longer occur. A “colonial America” was no more. Now it was a new nation, with a government guaranteeing *religious liberty* for all. It had been decided.

Freedom and Religious Plurality



The First Amendment frees all American from the need to accept anyone else's beliefs. This means that it provides simultaneously for freedom *from* any religion as well as freedom *of* religion. Americans are free to belong to the religious organization of their choice, thereby rejecting the claims of any other faith system. At the same time, Americans are free to create new religions, thereby rejecting all other established religions. They are also free to choose not to belong to or believe in any religion. No matter what the choice, each and every American maintains full status as a citizen.

The rights accorded all Americans by their Constitution have been widely recognized and acclaimed, not only by those in the legal profession, but also by those in religious circles as well. For example, the American Baptist Churches have had a long history supporting individual human rights. Resolutions by the American Baptist Churches over the years have particularly sought to reflect the denomination's basic principles of freedom of thought and belief, and the right of dissent.

As American Baptists we declare the following rights to be basic human rights, and we will support programs and measures to assure these rights: 1) The right of every person to choose a religion freely, to maintain religious belief or unbelief without coercion...

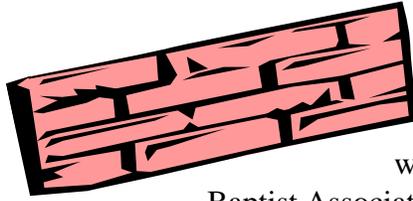
It is important to note that this portion of the Resolution recognizes the rights of persons who endorse "unbelief" in religion as a basis for life. The rights that the resolution claims for those who "maintain religious belief" are the same rights afforded to those who choose not to maintain such beliefs.

On May 26, 1988, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin addressed the Center for Clinical Medical Ethics, University of Chicago Hospital. His subject was "Euthanasia: Ethical and Legal Challenge." He began his address as follows:

One of the hallmarks of our democratic system of government and our social environment here in the United States is the fact that a plurality of views informs our public discourse regarding fundamental human questions. At times, these views flow from religious beliefs. At other times, they derive from philosophical or pragmatic judgments about the meaning and purpose of life. This pluralism is the result of the free speech accorded by the Constitution to each citizen as well as the right both to freely exercise one's religion and to practice no religion.

As one might expect, Cardinal Bernardin's guiding principles were derived from his Roman Catholic faith. However, the Cardinal, like those of the Baptist faith, recognized and acknowledged the rights of other Americans to accept no religion and to base their guiding principles on a philosophy (or philosophies). This idea has important overtones regarding the responsibilities of both government and education.

A Wall of Separation



Because the government may not engage in the promotion or endorsement of any particular belief system, it is required by law that all of the varying forms of belief and nonbelief expressed by the people be honored and respected. What the First Amendment created was, in the words of Thomas Jefferson in his letter to the Danbury (Connecticut) Baptist Association, “a wall of separation between church and state.”

The protections of freedom guaranteed by this wall of separation include the individual rights to free choice and to privacy of choice. That is to say, not only is the individual free to make a personal choice regarding belief or disbelief in any or all religions, but the person cannot be required to disclose that choice or have that choice used against him or her as a basis for discrimination. In the United States of America, we are all equal under the law of the land, no matter in what we choose to believe or disbelieve. This concept was reinforced in Justice Hugo Black’s decision in the *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947) case:

The “establishment of religion” clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws that aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion to another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect “a wall of separation between Church and State.”

The “wall” that was erected pertains not only to the establishment of a religion, but also to the establishment of religious codes of morality through the passage of civil laws. Consider this example: a certain religion puts forth as doctrine that “divorce is acceptable *only* on the grounds of adultery and for no other reasons.” Any married couple committed to that religion would not seek a divorce unless adultery was involved. To divorce for some other excuse (religiously proscribed) would be *immoral*, because the church had forbidden such an action.

Now suppose that a given community or state is comprised mostly of members of this same religion. Should the *law* be such that *all* married couples must stay married unless there has been adultery? If religion and government were one, no other type of divorce would be permissible. But, with separation of state and church, a “religious edict” defin-

ing permissible divorce is *not* the “rule of law.” Even though the majority of individuals in the district may belong to the religion, the church cannot “proclaim by decree” the public’s divorce law. That is, *civil* codes cannot be limited to or by that which a particular *religion* accepts as right and proper.



Civic morality must be *secular* morality; it must be derived from the needs of *all*, rather than from any specific set of religious doctrine, dogma, or law. Therefore legal divorce becomes possible on various grounds ranging from “no-fault to incompatibility to infidelity.” Of course, any given religious organization may have its own grounds for *acknowledging* the legal divorce. But, that policy remains within the faith system and has no legitimacy in civil law or necessary significance for the populace at large affected by the law.

Even though individual church members may as voters collectively have a strong voice and influence generally, the strength of the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment is that members of religious minorities are not to lose their *civil* rights to a religious majority, even a powerful one. Certain individual rights (in this case, freedom to divorce) cannot be taken away from persons, no matter how small a contingent of the citizenry they may be.

Religiously Neutral Public Schooling



Teaching about religion
— fair and square.

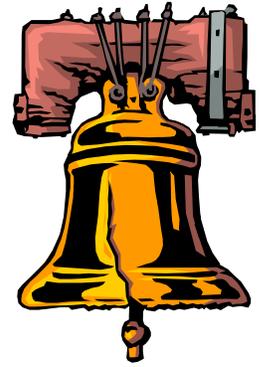
Although the teaching and promulgation of a particular faith system is accepted as appropriate in educational institutions founded and funded solely by individual religious organizations, it is both inappropriate and illegal for any public school or any public school teacher to teach or to endorse in any way the concepts or dogmas associated with any specific religion or belief system. However, in courses where teaching about religion is authorized by the state educational system, it is proper and it is legal to teach *about* religion objectively, while avoiding the practice of or instruction in religion.

Impartiality is an imperative for teaching about religion in public schools. It encompasses recognition of the rights of people living in a free society to choose between the various faith systems as well as their right to reject any one or all of such faith systems. Just as public school teachers may neither advance nor inhibit any religious doctrine, neither should they promote religion over nonreligion.

It is important for those responsible for and involved in public education to be fully cognizant of the broad spectrum of religious perspectives that may be present in any American classroom, and to ensure that each child’s freedom of conscience is duly valued. No child’s beliefs may be favored over another’s. Nor may any child’s religious belief *or absence of belief* be disparaged. All students are deserving of commensurate regard whether they hold to a familiar religion, to an unfamiliar or minority one, or reject religion entirely. Each budding citizen has a freedom of conscience and belief deserving of respect.

For a teacher to honor each student’s equal right to freedom of conscience is not the same as validating the truthfulness of their outlooks or endowing the different views with equivalent cultural legitimacy. Rather, it is modeling for the students the governmental principle that each citizen possesses religious liberty.

It is significant to note that over twenty percent of the human race today either has remained free from or decided *not* to embrace religion.⁵ There is considerable historical evidence that such individuals have long been players in the human story, and so an objective rendering of prior times obliges educators to acknowledge these persons. That is to say, a fair mandate for teaching about religions needs also to include *teaching about the beliefs of those who reject a religion or religions.*



Teaching about religion in an impartial manner necessitates acknowledging the legitimacy of lives lived according to varying belief systems. A fair and just curriculum gives recognition to the lives committed to a *nonreligious* way of life as well as to a religious one.

To teach only about religious belief systems and not teach that many individuals discard and/or disregard religion is prejudicial to academic integrity. Teaching about freethinking as it has come into play in history and as it exists today is part and parcel of the “teaching about religion” ballgame.

Constitutional Guarantees of Religious Liberty

United States Constitution, Art. VI, par.3: “...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”

First Amendment of the Constitution: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

The U. S. Supreme Court Speaks

The clearest and most concise explication of the meaning of the separation principle in the First Amendment was contained in Justice Hugo Black’s majority opinion in **Everson v. Board of Education, 330 U.S. 1, 1947.**

The “establishment of religion” clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can pass laws that aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion to another. Neither can force nor influence a person to go to or to remain away from church against his will or force him to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion. No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs, for church attendance or non-attendance. In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect “a wall of separation between Church and State.”

Justice Stewart stated even more strongly the protection of freedom from religion in **School District of Abington v. Schempp (374 U.S. 203, no. 142, 1963):**

What our Constitution indispensably protects is the freedom of each of us, be he Jew or Agnostic, Christian or Atheist, Buddhist or Freethinker, to believe or disbelieve, to worship or not worship, to pray or keep silent, according to his own conscience, uncoerced and unrestrained by government.

In **Torcaso v. Watkins (367 US 488, 1961)** Justice Black in his unanimous opinion said:

We repeat and again reaffirm that neither a State nor Federal Government can constitutionally force a person 'to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion.' Neither can constitutionally pass laws or impose requirements which aid all religions as against nonbelievers, and neither can aid those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against those religions founded on different beliefs.

In **Epperson v. Arkansas, (393 U.S. 97, 1968)**, Justice Fortas in his unanimous opinion said:

Government in our democracy, state and national, must be neutral in matters of religious theory, doctrine, and practice. It may not be hostile to any religion or to the advocacy of no-religion; and it may not aid, foster, or promote one religion or religious theory against another or even against the militant opposite. The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion.

In **Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U.S. 38, 1985**

The individual's freedom to choose his own creed is the counterpart of his right to refrain from accepting the creed established by the majority. Moreover, the individual freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment embraces the right to select any religious faith or none at all.

Professor Joseph Tussman wrote in ***The Supreme Court on Church and State* (1962)**:

It is, I hope, hardly necessary to add, as we try to understand and deal wisely with the problems of religious freedom, that the freedom and dignity of the nonbeliever—the agnostic or the atheist—is as precious and as much to be protected as that of the believer. Earlier, we would have called ourselves a 'Christian nation.' More recently the phrase is a 'religious nation.' Someday, we may come to think of ourselves as a spiritual nation, deeply involved in the quest for truth about the nature of the universe and man's [and woman's] place in it.



Endnotes

¹Bunge, Mario, "The Scientist's Skepticism," *The Skeptical Inquirer*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1992, p. 377f.

²Huxley, Thomas Henry, "Agnosticism," *Science and the Christian Tradition*. London: Macmillan & Co., 1894. Reprinted in Gordon Stein, *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus Books, 1980, pp. 42-45.

³Tillich, Paul, *The Dynamics of Faith*. NY: Harper and Row (Torchbook), 1958, p. 124.

⁴Commager is quoted in Menendez, Albert J., and Edd Doerr, *The Great Quotations on Religious Freedom*. Long Beach, CA: Centerline Press, 1991, p. 21f.

⁵O'Brien, Joanne and Martin Palmer, *The State of Religion Atlas*, New York: Simon and Schuster (Touchstone), 1993, p. 41.