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HUMANIST Monthly

A Publication of the Capital District Humanist Society
Connecting the Secular Humanist Community of Upstate New York, Western Massachusetts, and Southern Vermont

Sunday, June 11th, 2023 at 1:00 PM

Conspiracy Theories and the People Who Believe Them

Conspiracy theories are inevitable in complex human societies, and while they have always been with us, their ubiquity in our political discourse is seemingly unprecedented. In this talk, Professor Joseph Uscinski will marshal survey data collected over the last sixty years to show the over time trends in these beliefs amongst the public. Why do Americans believe conspiracy theories? Are these beliefs more prevalent now? What could or should be done about conspiracy theories? This talk will provide surprising answers to these questions.

Joseph Uscinski is one of the foremost experts on conspiracy theories and the people who believe them. For more than a decade, he has been polling Americans about their beliefs in conspiracy theories and other dubious ideas. His research has helped to uncover why people believe in conspiracy theories, when, and to what effect. He is a professor of Political Science at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida. He is also a lifetime fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry.

He has authored more than 60 published scientific articles and chapters, many of which are highly influential and have appeared in top scientific outlets. He is the author of Conspiracy Theories: A Primer, the first textbook on conspiracy theories, and co-author of American Conspiracy Theories, widely considered the foundational study of modern conspiracy theories. His work is currently supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and National Institute of Health. He frequently appears in national and international news, and has been quoted in The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Los Angeles Times, USA Today, The Atlantic, The Guardian, Newsweek, and Politico. He has appeared as on CBS Sunday Morning News, Fox News Channel, BBC, and numerous other outlets. Joseph Uscinski earned his BA at Plymouth State University in Plymouth, NH, his MA at University of New Hampshire, and his PhD at the University of Arizona.

This program will take place online, via Zoom, on Sunday, June 11th at 1:00 PM. Current paid CDHS members will receive an invite to the meeting via e mail. Non-members may attend. Send an email request to CDHS.Albany@gmail.com, or log onto our Meetup page: <https://www.meetup.com/Capital-District-Society/>. Click on 'Join', then on 'Attend', and use the RSVP function and the link will be available to you.



Dr. Joseph Uscinski

.....and on July 9th: "Never Trust An Ocelot to Parallel Park"

Musings, essays, & songs about staying somewhat skeptical in a world of credulity. Recounting his travels around the planet representing science appreciation, George Hrab talks and sings about his adventures as an unexpected and unelected representative of the critical thinking movement. From hiking across the Galapagos Islands in search of Blue Footed Boobies, to being hesitant to ring a service bell at a late night bodega; George happily provides a few minutes of distraction and a "brain sorbet" for those deeply ensconced in the humanist movement.



George Hrab

There'll be some changes made—we hope!

The Executive Council is working on a plan to bring back live CDHS monthly meetings, along with a video link for those who wish to view our meetings online. The planning is in the earliest stages, with no location or timing set. STAY TUNED!



Capital District Humanist Society, Inc.

Established 1986

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CDHS is affiliated with:

The American Humanist Association (AHA)

Center for Inquiry (CSI)

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The Secular Coalition for America (SCA)

RECAP OF OUR MAY SPEAKER'S TALK

J. Anderson Thomson is a psychiatrist who spoke about his book, *Why We Believe in God(s): A Concise Guide to the Science of Faith*. Everyone knows religion reflects trying to explain what we don't understand; to gain a moral touchstone; to combat fears of death. All more or less conscious mental phenomena. But Thomson went deeper.

He began by twice quoting Jefferson in 1816, on how religious dogmas (as distinct from moral principles) have forever induced people to battle and torture each other over abstractions actually beyond the comprehension of any human mind. Charles Darwin was then nine, and would go on to supply the understanding of our origins equipping us to rise above Jefferson's lament.

The evolutionary process he demystified reveals us to be, at the most fundamental level, "problem solving devices" aimed at gene replication. One's own individual well-being and survival is just a means to that end. This is Richard Dawkins's "selfish gene" paradigm. Really ultimately just math — traits enhancing an organism's likelihood of reproducing will proliferate in subsequent generations, carrying along the genes associated with them. In service to this our brains evolved — mostly performing functions not even in conscious awareness.

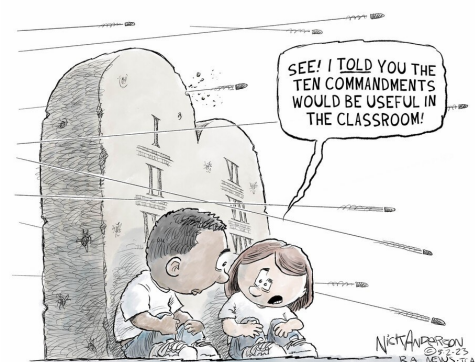
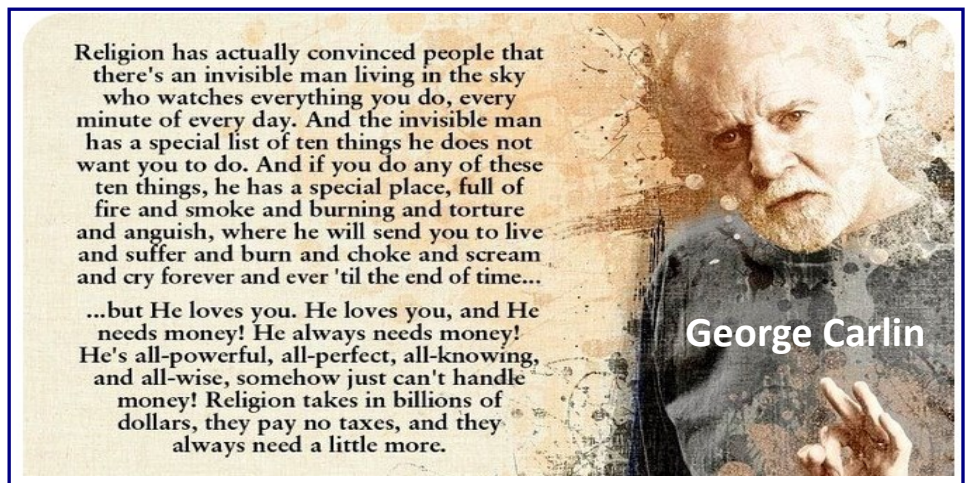
Thomson spoke of junk food and pornography as "super-normal stimuli" outclassing ones we encounter naturally, hijacking the brain to cause behaviors responsive to very deep-seated desires whose true evolutionary purpose is not to reward us but to get our genes into the next generation. Religion does similar.

It takes advantage of a key human evolutionary adaptation, "eusociality" — described by Thomson as "colony life" or an endless camping trip with close relatives. Religion meshes helpfully with this by enabling expansion beyond just family groups into larger (and thus stronger) social collectives.

He also stressed the salience of parent-child relationships, and how religion gains a foothold in our minds by mirroring that. Especially the mother-child bond. Belief in a deity mirrors knowledge of a mother's existence, actually filling roles akin to a god's. Mothers answer prayers; they're seen as omniscient and omnipotent. A loving presence in challenging circumstances. They provide sustenance. Thomson placed the Christian communion sacrament in this context (though without specifically mentioning breast milk).

Another key theme is that religions ask us to suspend disbelief only within limited bounds — we're set up with alarms against gross violations of the natural order, but religions tend to entail only modest tweaks to our understandings of how things work. He also discussed ritual, especially "rhythmic physical activity" like dancing and even just touching. Affecting us on a deep subconscious level by boosting endorphin levels, thus raising pain thresholds and promoting interpersonal bonding. Mirror neurons come into play. Yet another deep mechanism religion exploits, with even nonbelievers finding it hard to resist an emotional response.

by Frank Robinson



TALK 'n TOPIC- Attention new and old Humanists- Keep the date open – June 24th at 1pm. Our topic will be **JUNETEENTH** and related topics. We'll be gathering outside in a Colonie Park for comradery and conversation. Please bring input, a lawnchair and lunch for yourself while we share some time with our fellow Humanists in the shade. Watch for an eblast for details. Input for future topics is always welcome.



Sherry Levine

SOCIALS

We Bonded at the April 29th Saratoga Auto Museum, followed by lunch at Hattie's Restaurant.

What a mix! - James Bond's cars and southern home cooking!



Our May social was a visit to the buildings of the Albany Shaker Community near Albany International Airport. The CDHS members were treated to an informative tour of some of the buildings in the community complex.

The Shakers were a Utopian society whose beliefs on gender and racial equality and communal living date to the late 1700s. You may know about Shaker furniture, admired Shaker oval boxes, hummed the *Simple Gifts* song ('Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free...) and even worn a Shaker stitch sweater. The Shakers' first permanent settlement was in Albany County.

We thank Dee Fuller for arranging for the tour and the photographs.



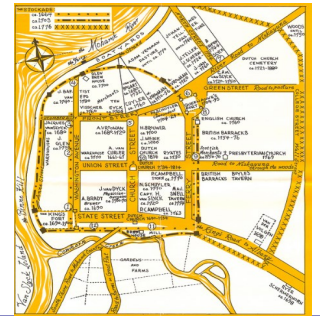
Our June Social: Gossips and Gadfly, a private tour of the Stockade in Schenectady

The walking tour will begin at **2 PM on Saturday, June 17th** and cost **\$10 per person**. We'll meet at 32 Washington Avenue in Schenectady. Learn many things about the Stockade section of Schenectady that you probably never knew before.

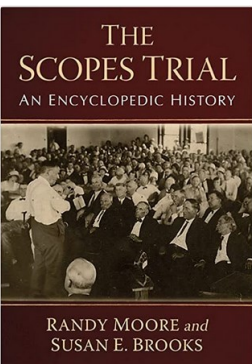
It is claimed that the Stockade is the oldest residential neighborhood in the United States.

Email Dee Fuller by June 15th if you are interested in joining the tour.

(candacelf13@gmail.com).



🎵 "Gimme that Olde Time Religion"



When I was a teenager, I saw the play, *Inherit the Wind*, starring Paul Muni, Tony Randall and Ed Bagley on Broadway. The 1925 trial of John Scopes in tiny Dayton, Tennessee, remains a defining moment in American history. This "trial of the century"--a "media event" before the term was coined--addressed issues that still affect our society today, such as control of the school curriculum,

the ongoing tensions between science and faith in public schools, and the ramifications of teaching evolution and human origins.

Viewing the play turned me toward the secular. There are two new books out there authored or co-authored by Randy Moore. They are both good reads as we approach the hundredth anniversary of the trial.

Frank H Wind

In case you've been wondering....The **Flying Spaghetti Monster (FSM)** is the deity of the **Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster**, or **Pastafarianism**, a social movement that promotes a light-hearted view of religion. It originated in opposition to the teaching of intelligent design in public schools. According to adherents, Pastafarianism (a portmanteau of *pasta* and *Rastafarianism*) is a "real, legitimate religion, as much as any other".^[4] It has received some limited recognition as such.

The "Flying Spaghetti Monster" was first described in a satirical open letter written by Bobby Henderson in 2005 to protest the Kansas State Board of Education decision to permit teaching intelligent design as an alternative to evolution in public school science classes. In the letter, Henderson demanded equal time in science classrooms for "Flying Spaghetti Monsterism", alongside intelligent design and evolution.^[11]



After Henderson published the letter on his website, the Flying Spaghetti Monster rapidly became an Internet phenomenon and a symbol of opposition to the teaching of intelligent design in public schools. (Wikipedia)

May 4th is the National Day of Prayer (NDP). Not surprisingly, this is not Americans United's favorite event. The government should never be involved in telling people when, how or whether to pray. Although the NDP is technically privately sponsored, a federal law fixes the date as the first Thursday in May and requires the president to issue a proclamation recognizing the day. Local, state and federal officeholders often attend events rife with "civil religion." In some communities, aggressive Christian Nationalist organizations sponsor NDP events, exclude non-Christian groups and use the NDP to spread false history about how the United States was supposedly founded to be a Christian nation.

The National Day of Prayer is yet another relic from the 1950s, a time when our government employed the syntax and symbols of religion (always generic forms of Christianity) to rally Americans against the officially atheistic Soviet Union, our arch-enemy. This same surge of Christian Nationalism also brought us "In God We Trust" as the national motto and the words "Under God" added to the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Soviet Union is long gone, and growing numbers of Americans are stepping away from organized religion. The NDP never made much sense for America, and it's only becoming more anachronistic as the nation changes.

Rob Boston (Americans United—5/15/23)

'In God We Trust' Absent On New Mississippi License Plates After Atheists' Lawsuit

Mississippi's license plates will no longer feature the words "In God We Trust" after Gov. Tate Reeves unveiled a new design on Tuesday, featuring a white background with a single white magnolia flower like the one on the state flag at its center.

Since 2019, Mississippi license plates have featured an off-center image of the Mississippi State Seal, which includes the words "In God We Trust." Former Gov. Phil Bryant said in 2015 that adding "In God We Trust" to the state seal "professed our understanding of a higher power over the affairs of men." In June 2021, though, the Washington D.C.-based organization American Atheists and three Mississippi plaintiffs sued the State over the license plates, arguing that requiring nonreligious residents to display the words "In God We Trust" or pay a fee for an alternative tag violated their rights. In federal court, Mississippi Attorney General Lynn Fitch's office argued that the "In God We Trust" license plates do not violate the rights of nonreligious Mississippians because they can use decals to cover up the offending words on the plates. The plaintiffs claimed that doing so would violate State law that prohibits doing anything that "covers or obstructs any portion of a license tag."



Mississippi Free Press (5/3/23)

How Religion Influences Politics

"One of the most significant shifts in American politics just took place and it barely got any notice," said Ryan Burge of Politico. The latest US religion census reveals that from 2010 to 2020, the share of Americans with a religious affiliation dropped by 11 points. This change "will ripple across the political landscape changing how Republicans and Democrats fare in states critical to presidential elections. The "God Gap" is a real phenomenon: religiously observant people, especially white Christians, are more likely to vote Republican than those who have a secular worldview, who are much more likely to vote for Democrats. In 2020, Joe Biden got nearly half of his votes from nonreligious voters.

The news from the latest data is mixed for both parties. Religion's influence is not only fading in New England and the Pacific Northwest, but has also sharply declined across the Rust Belt states Wisconsin, Michigan and Pennsylvania. That gives Democrats a much better chance of winning those swing states. But religiosity is actually growing in Florida and Texas, likely locking them in as red states. Religion's hold on American society is rapidly changing, and the shifts "could decide the 2024 election" and future elections as well.

from Politico in The Week

They're Driving on a Military Base, Not Visiting a Religious Retreat

The word "blessed," defined as being "endowed with divine favor and protection," has no place coming out of the mouths of military base gate guards as they admit service members, civilian employees, and visitors onto their base, but recently at Joint Base Andrews, well-known as the home of Air Force One, several gate guards — armed, uniformed airmen — have adopted "Have a blessed day" as their salutation to personnel passing through the gate — wishing base personnel "divine favor and protection" whether they want it or not. Many absolutely do NOT want it, fifteen of whom, eight of them Christians, have come to the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (MRFF) to get this religious greeting committee to knock it off.

The greeting "Have a blessed day" is commonplace in the South. It is also distinctly Christian. People of no other religion use it. In fact, it is seen by many, like the poster who wrote the following on Democratic Underground, as code for "I'm a Christian" wish that my day be "blessed", but instead it is a way of signaling to me that they are a Christian.... For some reason, that phrase strikes me as being a bit pretentious. I feel like it's not a sincere wish that my day be "blessed", but instead it is a way of signaling to me that they are a Christian. Are they testing me? I wonder if this phrase is something like a secret-handshake. I also wonder what the "correct" response would be from someone who wanted to signal-back that they too were a Christian. Are they just assuming that I'm a Christian? If they knew I was an atheist, would they STILL want me to have a blessed day?

by Chris Rodda—5/19/23 in LAProgressive.com

From Americans United

Discrimination in the Name of Religion

A new Florida law invites religious interference in health care

Imagine being in a serious accident. You're losing blood and barely conscious. Then, an ambulance pulls up. An emergency medical technician dashes out. He takes a look at you and does ... nothing. You see, he's determined that you're gay or transgender and says he has a religious or moral objection to treating you. So, he leaves.

Ridiculous, right? That could never happen in America! Wrong. It will be able to happen in Florida starting July 1, thanks to a new law signed by Gov. Ron DeSantis (R).

'Let them die'

The so-called Protections of Medical Conscience Act – dubbed the “Let Them Die Act” by its opponents – allows health care providers and entities that pay for health care, such as insurance companies, to offer care “in a manner consistent with their moral, ethical, and religious convictions.” The law defines health care very broadly, saying it includes “but [is] not limited to, medical research, medical procedures, testing, diagnosis, referral, dispensing medications, therapy, recordkeeping, and ‘any other care or service.’”

AU weighs in

In an April 26 letter, Americans United warned Florida legislators that the bill would create “a serious threat to the health and well-being of patients.”

AU's letter observed, “Under the bill, a wide range of health care workers, facilities, hospitals, and insurers could refuse to participate in or pay for nearly any health care service. The result – patients would face serious harm. It would foster discrimination against patients – particularly women and LGBTQ patients – by putting the religious beliefs of health care providers, institutions, and insurers above their health.”

The law is one of several anti-LGBTQ measures that have been passed in Florida, where DeSantis is hard at work turning the state into a giant laboratory for Christian Nationalist policy. Christian Nationalist legislators in other states are gleefully pointing to the Sunshine State as a model.

Take a good look, America. Is this what you want?



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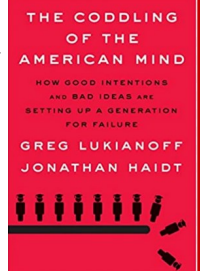
Appointed Positions

Hospitality	Mira Peck
Room Arrangements	Frank Robinson

CDHS Book Group

is reading *The Coddling of the American Mind* by Lukianoff and Haidt. They meet on the 2nd and 4th Thursdays.

Contact Frank Robinson if you want to join the spirited and informative discussion.



Back in the 1800's, the Tate's Watch Company of Massachusetts wanted to add to their product line, and since they already made cases for watches, they decided to also use them for compasses.

The new compasses were so bad, people often ended up in Canada or Mexico, rather than California. This, of course, is the origin of the expression—“He who has a Tate's is lost!”

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Visit us on the web at humanistsociety.net

The Capital District Humanist Society (CDHS) is an independent, non-profit (and non-prophet), non-partisan and strictly non-religious educational and social organization for those who share humanist values: commitment to education, rational and free inquiry, democracy, social concerns and fellowship. CDHS is affiliated with the four major humanist organizations - the American Humanist Association (AHA), the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH), the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) and the Humanists International (HI).

There are five types of CDHS member support: Individual, \$50/yr; Family, \$80/yr; Sustaining, \$100/yr; Patron, \$150/yr; and Lifetime Member, one contribution of \$1000 or more.

Members receive our publication, *The Humanist Monthly*, and vote by mail each September on the make-up of the governing Executive Council. Members are eligible for election to the Executive Council and may also serve as appointed officials. Members are welcome to attend Executive Council meetings.

The IRS recognizes CDHS as a tax-exempt organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code. Therefore, all donations, both cash and materials with established “fair market value”, qualify as charitable contributions for income tax purposes.

Donations are gratefully accepted to help speed our growth. CDHS is a tax-exempt 501(c)(3) organization under the IRS Code. Financial disclosure information and our annual report are available upon request.

If you know of someone who may be interested in CDHS, please pass this newsletter along or give us the name; we will send a sample copy or two with no obligation.

We value your input. In the best humanist tradition, CDHS has no rigid picture of itself. We ask you to join us, not follow us. What activities and services would you like CDHS to provide its members? Send us your suggestions, questions, and comments.



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