

# Annie Laurie Gaylor Exploring religious freedom episode 04

Video available at <https://youtu.be/cspncemMA9A>

0:00:01.490,0:00:06.480

(Alastair Lichten) Hello and welcome to episode 4 of the National Secular Society's podcast and

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Part 4 in our series Exploring Religious Freedom. I'm Alastair Lichten, Head of

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Education at the NSS, and in this series I'm speaking with a variety of experts and

0:00:16.769,0:00:21.800

activists about religious freedom. What does it mean? What are its limits?

0:00:21.800,0:00:26.339

And how might it be abused? Listener, I'm gonna give you a little peek behind the

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curtain here and let you know that today's episode comes a bit out of order.

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I like to space the episodes out regularly, but sometimes you just need to

0:00:34.110,0:00:38.490

grab an interview with a subject when you can, so in this interview I

0:00:38.490,0:00:42.420

spoke with Anne Laurie Gaylor and you'll hear us mentioning Religious Freedom Day

0:00:42.420,0:00:47.910

in the US, which is on the 16th of January. Anne Laurie Gaylor is a co-founder and

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co-president of the American based  
Freedom From Religion Foundation.

0:00:52.420,0:01:00.920

I'll be back at the end of the interview with  
some reflections and closing remarks.  
Enjoy.

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Annie Laurie, welcome to the NSS podcast  
(Annie Laurie Gaylor) Thank you for inviting me.

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(AL) You're very welcome.  
You're co-president

0:01:07.620,0:01:11.340

of the Freedom From Religion Foundation.  
I wonder if you can start by telling the

0:01:11.340,0:01:16.240

audience a little bit about the FFRF,  
and how you came to be a secularist activist.

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(ALG) Yes, I am a co-founder of the  
Freedom From Religion Foundation, and I

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co-founded it with my mother, Anne Nicole  
Gaylor, back in 1976, when I was a

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college student, and she was a very  
well-known feminist activist in

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Wisconsin, and nationally, and our  
eyes were opened to the dangers of

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religion and government because she, in  
her work to legalize contraception and

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abortion in the state of Wisconsin, and  
we realized that the only organized

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opposition was religious in nature, and they were trying to inflict their dogma

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on everyone else through civil law. And she was asked to go national with the

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group in 78 and I became co-president with Dan Barker in about 2005 I think.

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And we are in our 41st year, and we have rectified many violations of the

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separation of church and state, taken over 70 lawsuits, won most of them.

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We have grown from the original two of us to over 31,000 members in North America,

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and our members are mainly non theists: atheists, agnostics, skeptics, rationals.

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We like to joke that we don't care what you call yourself, we all disbelieve in the

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same gods. So we have two purposes:  
- to keep religion out of government,

0:02:42.920,0:02:45.780

to defend the constitutional wall of separation between church and state

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that's in the American Constitution, and  
- to educate the public about non-theism,

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to promote the Enlightenment,  
to promote the free thought point of view and

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represent free thinkers, especially  
interested in keeping religion out of social policy.

0:03:01.840,0:03:06.560  
(AL) So the FFRF advocates for  
religious freedom and the separation of

0:03:06.560,0:03:12.000  
church and state, but you come at that  
from a specifically non religious perspective.

0:03:12.000,0:03:15.930  
(ALG) Yes we do. Although we do  
represent religious people in some of

0:03:15.930,0:03:19.400  
our lawsuits and some of our legal complaints.  
(AL) What do you think the

0:03:19.400,0:03:23.860  
strengths and weaknesses of that approach are?  
(ALG) The strength is that we are purists.

0:03:23.860,0:03:28.700  
We don't get, we don't have a  
conflict that suddenly we're taking a

0:03:28.709,0:03:33.870  
position that our church is going to not  
like, and that's one of the things that

0:03:33.870,0:03:39.019  
has freed the Freedom From Religion  
Foundation, to be absolute in our

0:03:39.020,0:03:42.920  
definition of separation of church and  
state, and to take some lawsuits that

0:03:42.920,0:03:47.160  
some of the other groups, that have  
religious ties, would not be willing to take.

0:03:47.160,0:03:51.500  
Because churches are not comfortable with them.  
And one of the weaknesses, of course,

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is that we're a great minority in the United States.

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But since FFRF was founded, of course, we've seen enormous growth in the number of seculars.

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And it's never been a better time, in the United States, to be without religion.

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We have a lot more company and there's about 24% of the

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population identifies as non-religious, not necessarily as atheists, and we're

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seeing much higher numbers among what's called Generation Z -

0:04:22.080,0:04:27.180

young people - in their teenage years.

We're seeing up to 36%,

0:04:27.180,0:04:30.960

and 21% of them actually saying they're atheist or agnostic.

0:04:30.960,0:04:35.280

So that's a huge sea change here in this country, where we're finally catching up

0:04:35.280,0:04:42.940

with the free thinkers in in the UK and in much of Europe.

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But, because we are a minority, I think that, of course, that makes it harder, and sometimes people

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will say "Well why don't you just work for separation of church and state, and

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then anybody of any belief could join you?"

And this is true, but we like to

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point out there are other groups for  
believers to join, such as

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Americans United for Separation of Church and State.  
And so, you know, I think the

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more people fighting the same problem,  
chipping away at the same problem, from

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different perspectives, makes our movement stronger.

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(AL) So this is part of a series of discussions about religious freedom.

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How does freedom from religion relate to that?

(ALG) Well we believe, most sincerely,

0:05:30.560,0:05:36.020

that there can be no true religious liberty without the freedom to dissent.

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You cannot dissent once there's religion  
in government. Watch out!

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And then, invariably, persecution follows, as Thomas Paine wrote so many years ago.

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We also feel that secularism is a  
prerequisite for women's rights, for

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LGBTQ rights, for unfettered science,  
which, you know, stem-cell research, is

0:06:02.770,0:06:08.560

still greatly fettered here in the United States.

You can't really have true liberty

0:06:08.580,0:06:12.820

if you have religion in government.

(AL) There might be a perception

0:06:12.820,0:06:22.160

that freedom of religion is for the religious  
and that freedom from religion is for the irreligious.

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Is that fair and, if not, is that a problem for those advocating for

0:06:26.540,0:06:31.320

the separation of church and state?

(ALG) I think there's definitely a perception among

0:06:31.320,0:06:36.560

many Americans that freedom of religion does not encompass any freedom to dissent,

0:06:36.560,0:06:39.880

or freedom for atheists or agnostics .

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But when you look at the word "of" and "from", they're really the same word, you know, in French.

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"De" means "of", "de" means "from".

The concepts go together, and

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in the United States we have the First  
Amendment of the Bill of Rights

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which says Congress shall make no law  
respecting an establishment of religion.

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That's the Establishment Clause that's  
interpreted to have a wall of separation

0:07:04.280,0:07:10.940

between church and state. But the second  
prong is prohibiting the free exercise thereof,

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and that's the freedom of religion.

And so the two things go together.

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And, really, what the First Amendment is about,  
what religious liberty is about,

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is about freedom of conscience.  
We all have freedom of conscience,

0:07:26.480,0:07:31.520  
to decide whether to accept or reject religion.  
That's what we're fighting for.

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(AL) We were originally scheduled to have this meeting on January 16th,

0:07:35.560,0:07:41.280  
which is religious freedom day in the US.  
I think one of the biggest challenges facing

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organizations, like the FFRF and the NSS,  
is a sort of redefining of religious freedom

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in hands of, not exclusively, but largely reactionary groups,

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as being about the freedom to impose religion, or an unlimited freedom that overrides other rights.

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What do you think we can do about this, what you might call might call, a distorted version of  
religious freedom?

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(ALG) It is one of the biggest fights that we  
have here in the United States, and,

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of course, Religious Freedom Day is the  
anniversary of the issuance of the

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Virginia statute for religious liberty,  
written by Thomas Jefferson.

0:08:19.080,0:08:24.780  
And that became the cornerstone that led to the  
First Amendment in the United States and

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actually often the the main text of it,  
the most important paragraph of it, is



0:08:31.740,0:08:36.720  
repeated almost word for word in  
probably about thirty five state constitutions,

0:08:36.720,0:08:41.520  
that no citizen shall be compelled  
to attend, to direct, or support,

0:08:41.520,0:08:47.120  
any place of worship or support  
any ministry or religious teachers.

0:08:47.120,0:08:52.880  
What makes the point about what you are  
saying, what the evidence of that, is that

0:08:52.880,0:08:58.220  
the religious right is turning, is  
weaponizing this very date, this anniversary.

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They're trying to turn  
Religious Freedom Day into a day that

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celebrates taking away religious liberty.  
This has all been organized and orchestrated

0:09:09.500,0:09:14.580  
by the religious right,  
to turn this anniversary on its head.

0:09:14.580,0:09:19.740  
This is exactly what is happening in the United States.  
We are seeing courts, even,

0:09:19.740,0:09:23.920  
and not just the religious right, use language that is appalling.

0:09:23.920,0:09:30.480  
We just had some arguments, by the Trump administration, against the contraceptive  
mandate.

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This has been one of the biggest religious freedom issues in the United States,

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because we had the Hobby Lobby decision, by the Supreme Court,

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that said that Obamacare's contraceptive mandate,

0:09:40.880,0:09:50.320

that said that women workers have to be given contraceptive appointments without extra penalty.

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And the Hobby Lobby decision, by the Supreme Court, said that, if they had a religious objection,

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employers could actually veto this kind of health care, or what kind of contraception women workers choose.

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It was a horrible decision, and they're still arguing for this,

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and they are using the language that we use at the

0:10:08.370,0:10:16.060

Freedom From Religion Foundation,  
saying that employers have the right,

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under freedom of conscience, to dictate to employees what kind of contraception they may, or may not, use.

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They're using the same language we've been using for years.  
It's incredible.

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(AL) So might this be a case where some people's religious freedom needs to be restricted or limited

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in order to protect the religious freedom of others,

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the religious freedom to manifest your  
belief, that you don't like contraceptives,

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bumps up against other people's religious freedoms or indeed freedom from religion?

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(ALG) Yes. I mean, they have the religious freedom to avoid or essee any kind of contraception that they want

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That protects their freedom of conscience.  
They don't have the right to force their

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contraceptive choices on others,  
especially their employees, and

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especially when it's a corporation it  
isn't even a church.

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The Hobby Lobby ruling was a disastrous ruling, which we have, you know, protested vociferously,

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and it has led to quite a groundswell of opposition.  
Whereas fighting we're still duking this out,

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but there's no question, there's some famous quotes,

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you know, your your freedoms and my nose.  
I mean, you can't swing your your fist

0:11:34.680,0:11:44.140

at somebody's nose and say that's your freedom.  
You can see that we have checks to so-called

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religious liberty. We don't allow polygamous marriages in the United States, for example.

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We don't, in theory, allow child brides.

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You can't commit crimes in the name of religion, although they happen frequently.

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And that's not justification.  
So of course there have to be checks and balances.

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But what the Religious Right and the Trump administration is saying

0:12:11.160,0:12:14.280

is that if you are religious the rules don't apply to you.

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And not only that, but you're allowed to force your religious views on others.

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(AL) If that is someone's view of what religious freedom means, and, obviously, I think we hold

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quite a philosophically similar view of what religious freedom actually means,

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how can we resolve these two understandings?

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(ALG) Well, I think through education and persuasion and common sense. You know, it would be,

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like, if at the Freedom From Religion Foundation, we said "we're all atheists here

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and you're not allowed to get pregnant, you're gonna have to have an abortion".

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That's our religious freedom.

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It's absurd. I think you have to show examples of how absurd it would be if we

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forced our views on religious people. And more education about why the United States

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was the first among nations. I mean talking to people in this country,

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to separate religion from government it's something that we should

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be proud of, and for years we have seen it stigmatized and we have seen public

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officials make remarks against it.  
It's like they are even afraid to say

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anything that is pro separation of church and state.  
We have lost a lot of ground since Robert Kennedy,

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as a candidate, felt compelled to make his famous speech,

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before Houston ministers, saying  
I believe in an America where the

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separation of church and state is  
absolute. And he went on in great depth

0:13:52.070,0:13:55.900

and detail to say why religion should  
not be in government.

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We don't see anybody saying this anymore.  
There's been quite a disinformation campaign.

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And even among progressive causes it always seems like the secular principle gets to the

0:14:06.740,0:14:11.540

bottom of the list of to Do's.  
You know, first there's protect abortion rights,

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and then there's protect LGBT, and  
this, and that, and the other, and nobody's

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thinking about the overall picture, that  
so many of these attacks, are really

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attacks on secularism.  
(AL) So what do you think the biggest challenge is to

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freedom of and from religion are today?  
(ALG) The biggest challenges, I think, are

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conveying why we adopted it, why it's essential for secularism and freedom to prosper.

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I think maybe the history has  
been forgotten in the United States.

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i don't think children get civics lesson anymore  
They're not taught to revere

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some of these constitutional principles  
as they were in my mother's time,

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growing up in the 1930s, for example, the  
education I received was very different.

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In the United States we have seen incursions that have miseducated the public,

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such as the adoption of other words under God in our Pledge of Allegiance,

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that tie piety to patriotism,  
putting the motto In God We Trust on

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money and saying it's it's a second  
motto for our nation. That all happened

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in the 1950s, and we get continually  
asked these questions by the media and

0:15:21.260,0:15:25.610

the public: How can you say that America  
isn't a religious nation?

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Our motto is 'in god we trust'  
and we always say "Well, it was a Johnny-come-lately,

0:15:29.940,0:15:33.140

it doesn't belong there, it's not even accurate."

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To be accurate it would have to say

" in God some of us trust" and that would be a

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very silly motto. It's exclusionary and I think this these things have miseducated the public

0:15:43.240,0:15:46.360

and we need to remind them of our secular heritage.

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(AL) On the surface of it ,that having the national motto being 'in god we trust',

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kind of seems like a minor religious privilege, a concession to the majority .

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How does that trickle down into

tangible restrictions on religious freedom?

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(ALG) Well, it is used as precedent to

excuse everything else that entangles

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religion and government, and we know this

from 41 years of experience dealing with

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public officials and dealing with a hostile public.

They all turn to these kinds of examples

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to justify worse violations.

The symbolic violations are

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among the worst in terms of the harm

they create, and they're among the top 10,

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or 3 even, that we get complaints of from

our many members around the nation.

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And it's it's justified a lot of violations and it's a lot of ignorance

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that we need to confront, and I would also blame religion, the religiosity

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of the American public, in my opinion, is how we got to where we are today politically.

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It has dummed down our nation, it isn't that surprising that

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we would have a president who plays with facts and talks about, you know

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alternates facts and fake news, when religion is basically the original fake news.

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And when people are taught to believe it's fine to believe anything

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that makes you feel good. It doesn't matter whether there's evidence for it.

0:17:22.820,0:17:28.240

(AL) Okay, and for those who don't share that perspective, for that those who are religious,

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either culturally or in terms of belief, how can they be persuaded to support separation of church and state?

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How can they be shown that that's good for them, as well?

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particularly if they are a member of the currently privileged majority?

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(ALG) Separation of church and state is good for everybody. All we have to do is look

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at history to see whenever you get one sect in power, it

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goes after all the others.

So, we have seen historically all kinds of

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discrimination, religious wars, pogroms,  
you name it.

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against the wrong religion. To  
be Catholic used to be practically a

0:18:16.680,0:18:22.260

crime in some countries and in some  
colonies here in the United States, much

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less to be Jewish.

The Protestants have been themselves

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discriminated against when they're  
living in what is basically a Catholic

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theocracy. The only way to protect  
everybody is to have a neutral

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government. And we have a bumper sticker  
at the Freedom From Religion Foundation

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that's applicable here in the United States:  
Protect the First Amendment - It Protects You.

0:18:45.560,0:18:51.520

So we all can live in harmony if our government stays out of the religion business.

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But once it enters religion, as I said,  
watch out!

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(AL)What role do you think that schools can play in improving the public understanding of religious  
freedom

0:19:03.960,0:19:08.420  
or the separation of church and state?  
(ALG) Well, in the United States I would say

0:19:08.420,0:19:13.000  
better civics lessons about the Constitution and how it was developed.

0:19:13.000,0:19:19.140  
I guess that, globally, when we study history

0:19:19.140,0:19:25.620  
and study the history of law,  
history of democracy, it's very important

0:19:25.620,0:19:29.930  
that the negative role that religion has played,

0:19:29.930,0:19:36.860  
in suppressing rights and starting wars,  
be objectively analyzed and discussed.

0:19:36.860,0:19:42.270  
There shouldn't be this assumption  
that everybody is religious, and perhaps

0:19:42.270,0:19:48.220  
that doesn't happen in some of the other nations, certainly happens in the United States,

0:19:48.220,0:19:53.240  
where we're just sort of excluded,  
non-believers are just excluded.

0:19:53.240,0:19:57.500  
It's just assumed everybody is religious.  
That's why politicians and every speech

0:19:57.500,0:20:05.020  
with "God bless you", even liberal ones.  
It becomes kind of a political gotcha issue,

0:20:05.020,0:20:10.560  
for most politicians in the United States,  
to wear religion on their sleeves.

0:20:10.560,0:20:15.750  
(AL) So how does the FFRF reclaim or  
defend freedom of/from religion?

0:20:15.750,0:20:20.010

(ALG) Well we spent 41 years trying to reeducate the public and politicians

0:20:20.010,0:20:25.560

about the secular roots of our government and our nation.

0:20:25.560,0:20:29.940

And we now have a strategic response team and we also are starting to do much more

0:20:29.940,0:20:34.440

lobbying in Congress. And we also have our members lobbying at their state legislators

0:20:34.440,0:20:40.600

when these bills come up, that are all based on the lie that America is a Christian nation

0:20:40.600,0:20:46.720

or that America is based on God. And our members are continually educating

0:20:46.720,0:20:51.140

about the importance of keeping religion out of government,

0:20:51.140,0:20:56.360

and and why that developed in the United States, looking at the colonies,

0:20:56.360,0:21:00.460

and all the persecution in most of the thirteen original colonies.

0:21:00.460,0:21:05.980

And so much of the religious warfare strife persecution in the old world.

0:21:05.980,0:21:13.500

And it's just going to take continual education to debunk this idea that religious liberty is something

0:21:13.500,0:21:18.000

that you use as a weapon against someone else. (AL) Okay thanks so much

0:21:18.000,0:21:21.680

Before you go, we always like to

ask our guests for some recommendations

0:21:21.680,0:21:28.480

Are there any books or films you'd recommend, that do a good job of exploring freedom of religion?

0:21:28.480,0:21:31.640

(ALG) We would like to see a film made about the

0:21:31.680,0:21:38.090

McCullum case of 1948, which was the first lawsuit before the Supreme Court,

0:21:38.090,0:21:43.480

in which the court got rid of religious instruction in the public schools.

0:21:43.480,0:21:49.000

And there's a wonderful book, by Vashti McCollum, who took that case, called One Woman's Fight.

0:21:49.000,0:21:57.600

And hard to get now, but it's as readable as a novel, and it really explains the toll

0:21:57.600,0:22:02.340

that is exacted on schoolchildren, when religion creeps into our public schools.

0:22:02.340,0:22:06.960

And it should be made into movie. It would be a very good movie. We're working on that.

0:22:06.960,0:22:10.860

Another book, that will be coming out in April or May,

0:22:10.860,0:22:17.640

is called Unamerican, and it's by Andrew Seidel, who is our Director of Strategic Response.

0:22:17.640,0:22:20.580

And he's a constitutional attorney who works for us.

0:22:20.580,0:22:25.360

And he explores not only the judeo-christian nation myth,

0:22:25.360,0:22:31.160

but he also explores why the Bible itself doesn't jive with American principles,

0:22:31.160,0:22:35.200

that are found in the Bill of Rights.  
So, it's called "Unamerican"

0:22:35.200,0:22:40.640

(AL) Okay. Well we'll put what links we can in the show notes the.

0:22:40.640,0:22:45.020

Annie Laurie, thank you so much for  
taking the time to speak to us today and

0:22:45.020,0:22:50.660

for exploring these issues with us.  
Before you go is there anything you'd like to plug?

0:22:50.660,0:22:56.180

(ALG) A couple of things I would like to plug.  
I would like to thank you, and thank NSS

0:22:56.180,0:23:01.360

for what it does, and has been doing  
for more for than a century,

0:23:01.360,0:23:09.640

and to ask listeners to come out of the closet,  
as atheists or agnostics and secularists,

0:23:09.640,0:23:16.720

and do what they can to support others.  
And we work right now with Center for Inquiry

0:23:16.720,0:23:23.900

and Bonya Ahmed, the widow of Avijit Roy,  
to help endangered free thinkers

0:23:23.900,0:23:27.840

around the world, where it does become a  
matter of life and death, because they live

0:23:27.900,0:23:32.340

in what's essentially, usually,  
an Islamist based theocracy.

0:23:32.340,0:23:35.600

And we have seen people murdered,  
we have seen people jailed,

0:23:35.600,0:23:41.940

we have seen great injustice toward non-believers who are called blasphemers or apostates.

0:23:41.940,0:23:46.950

And the Freedom From Religion Foundation is working to try

0:23:46.950,0:23:51.960

to actually get people out of these countries, or help them once they leave,

0:23:51.960,0:23:56.580

and we see this is going to become a bigger issue. And we're seeing more

0:23:56.580,0:24:03.030

countries engaged in persecution of atheists and agnostics. And this is

0:24:03.030,0:24:06.960

something that you can support through the Freedom From Religion Foundation, or

0:24:06.960,0:24:12.300

a group of your choice, or maybe start doing something in your own group.

0:24:12.300,0:24:17.940

We work with an international group, that kind of vet the needs,

0:24:17.940,0:24:21.440

and so we're secure that we're helping people who really need that help.

0:24:21.440,0:24:27.100

But it's going to become a bigger issue and it's something I'm very concerned about.

0:24:27.100,0:24:30.400

(AL) Thanks for sharing that, and we'll have links in the show notes.

0:24:30.400,0:24:34.360

Anne Laurie, thank you very much.  
(ALG) Thank you.

0:24:34.400,0:24:41.640

(AL) I hope you found that interesting, listener.

I think what Annie Laurie Gaylor and

0:24:41.640,0:24:46.640

the Freedom From Religion Foundation show is that it is possible to combat religious freedom, or

0:24:46.640,0:24:52.159

secularism, from a specific religious, or in this case irreligious perspective, as

0:24:52.159,0:24:55.070

long as you still defend it as a right for everyone.

0:24:55.070,0:25:00.110

You can fairly promote your own worldview and still be a consistent

0:25:00.110,0:25:07.020

activist for freedom of and from religion, as long as you don't expect that worldview to then be privileged.

0:25:07.020,0:25:13.780

This is a series leading up to our major conference: Secularism 2019 - Reclaiming Religious Freedom.

0:25:13.780,0:25:17.180

That's in May at the Tower Hotel in Central London.

0:25:17.180,0:25:21.320

Tickets are just £50 and members get an additional 50% discount.

0:25:21.320,0:25:29.300

You can find out more about the speakers and book your tickets at [secularism.org.uk/2019](http://secularism.org.uk/2019)

0:25:29.300,0:25:34.060

Before I go I normally ask my guests for any book recommendations they have,

0:25:34.060,0:25:37.700

and I'll put links in the show notes. But if you're looking for a good read that explores

0:25:37.700,0:25:41.260

themes relevant to secularism, then we also have a collection of fiction and

0:25:41.260,0:25:46.580

nonfiction reviews on our website at

[secularism.org.uk/reviews](http://secularism.org.uk/reviews)

0:25:46.580,0:25:51.740

you can find God, Guides and Guns, a review of  
The Handmaid's Tale by Margaret Atwood,

0:25:51.740,0:25:55.100

my review of Christian Nation by Frederic C. Rich,

0:25:55.100,0:25:57.640

and reviews of nonfiction books like

0:25:57.640,0:26:02.100

The Rage: The Vicious Circle of Islamist and Far-right Extremism

0:26:02.160,0:26:05.860

This podcast is produced by the  
National Secular Society.

0:26:05.860,0:26:10.940

The NSS works for the separation of religion and state and the equal respect for everyone's human  
rights,

0:26:10.940,0:26:15.080

so no one is either advantaged or disadvantaged  
on account of their beliefs.

0:26:15.080,0:26:19.360

Make a stand for freedom fairness and human rights  
by joining the NSS today.

0:26:19.360,0:26:22.620

Until next time, goodbye.