

Ep 25: American religious exceptionalism and Covid-19

Video available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-itavtk6Vv8>

0:00:05.649,0:00:06.149
You are listening to the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma Park (EP). In

Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) based in Madison, Wisconsin. This foundation is

0:00:06.149,0:00:10.490

0:00:55.039,0:00:59.149
the largest free thought organization in the US. In the following interview

0:00:10.490,0:00:15.170
this episode we will be discussing secularism in the USA and its opposition

0:00:59.149,0:01:03.170
Andrew discusses his experiences with the National Secular Society's Alastair

0:00:15.170,0:00:20.120
by the Religious Right. The United States was one of the first countries in the

0:01:03.170,0:01:12.860
Lichten (AL). (AL): Andrew welcome to the NSS podcast. (AS):

0:00:20.120,0:00:23.690
world to have a secular constitution in which the Church and the State were

Thank you so much for having me on. It is

0:00:23.690,0:00:28.280
clearly separated but in recent years the conservative Christian Right have

0:01:12.860,0:01:17.899
a true pleasure. (AL): Oh thank you very much. For our listeners who may not be

0:00:28.280,0:00:32.599
renewed their efforts to exert influence over political issues. Even in the

0:01:17.899,0:01:21.289
familiar with your work at the FFRF, do you want to give yourself a little

0:00:32.599,0:00:37.819
coronavirus crisis the evangelical lobby has pushed for and often won exceptions

0:01:21.289,0:01:26.329
introduction? (AS): Sure so we are the Freedom From Religion Foundation. We are the

0:00:37.819,0:00:41.300
from the restrictions on the freedom of movement that have been imposed for each

0:01:26.329,0:01:30.079
largest atheist agnostic "free thought" group as we call it in

0:00:41.300,0:00:46.219
State. One man who has long experience countering the influence of the

0:01:30.079,0:01:34.070
the United States. I believe we're the third largest in the world after

0:00:46.219,0:00:50.420
Christian Right in the US is Andrew Seidel (AS). Andrew is an attorney at the

0:01:34.070,0:01:39.079
you guys and then someone in Scandinavia. But we basically have two purposes:

0:00:50.420,0:00:55.039

0:01:39.079,0:01:43.850
we work to educate and to separate. So we work to educate the public about what it

0:01:43.850,0:01:48.799
is to be a non-believer here in the United States, the challenges we may face

0:01:48.799,0:01:53.090
and then we work to separate: to keep state and church separate and we have a

0:01:53.090,0:01:58.310
team of 10 attorneys (I'm one of them) and we litigate these cases in

0:01:58.310,0:02:03.109
court. We handle about 5,000 State/Church complaints every year. We try to solve

0:02:03.109,0:02:06.469
them without going to court, just simply through education for instance, writing a

0:02:06.469,0:02:10.190
letter and saying: "Hey what you're doing government official is wrong. Please stop

0:02:10.190,0:02:12.380
it!" And most of the time that works but if

0:02:12.380,0:02:15.379
it doesn't, we'll take the case to court. And that's

0:02:15.379,0:02:18.290
I mean the short version. We are a membership driven organization. We have got about

0:02:18.290,0:02:24.560
about 32,000 members right now and that's where all of our funding comes from. (AL): Cool, we wanted to have

0:02:24.560,0:02:27.980
wanted to have you on today to talk about religious exceptionalism

0:02:27.980,0:02:33.019
specifically in the context of the Covid-19 crisis and I guess religious

0:02:33.019,0:02:37.069
opposition to social distancing measures. Is this something you're experiencing at

0:02:37.069,0:02:42.859
the moment? (AS): Yes we are experiencing quite a bit of it here in the States and this

0:02:42.859,0:02:47.720
has quickly become the focus of a lot of the work that we're doing at the Freedom

0:02:47.720,0:02:53.889
From Religion Foundation because, seems to be, that the biggest opponents of

0:02:53.889,0:03:00.019
social distancing and 'stay at home' orders are churches. And specifically

0:03:00.019,0:03:03.919
conservative churches, evangelical churches, Christian nationalist churches

0:03:03.919,0:03:09.680
here in the United States. So the FFRF has devoted a lot of resources to helping

0:03:09.680,0:03:15.919
educate the - not just government officials - but the population, the public

0:03:15.919,0:03:21.889
in general, about why these orders are important and why there is no religious

0:03:21.889,0:03:26.769
freedom RIGHT to put others' lives at risk.

0:03:26.769,0:03:32.060
(AL): I assume that you're all personally in lock down at the moment then? (AS): Yes, yes been in

0:03:32.060,0:03:38.780
lock down for quite a while now. You know we had a family emergency early in

0:03:38.780,0:03:44.359

March and had to travel to Florida, which was sort of a 'hot spot', had

0:03:44.359,0:03:48.199
to drive to Florida here in the States and so we were in quarantine immediately

0:03:48.199,0:03:53.389
after we got home from that, a self quarantine for two weeks and have been

0:03:53.389,0:03:56.689
in quarantine ever since because then all the 'stay at home' orders

0:03:56.689,0:04:00.680
were issued when we were in the middle of that quarantine so yeah. I mean the

0:04:00.680,0:04:05.900
only thing we've left for is groceries and then once had a huge leak

0:04:05.900,0:04:11.000
in our roof that I had to repair so I had to go to you know our Home Depot and

0:04:11.000,0:04:16.039
grab the roofing supplies for that. But other than that we've been locked down

0:04:16.039,0:04:23.419
and trying to do our best to stay sane while stuck at home for days and days

0:04:23.419,0:04:27.290
and days. (AL): But the FFRF is able to continue

0:04:27.290,0:04:32.450
its work remotely? (AS): Yes we have a fantastic tech team at the Freedom From

0:04:32.450,0:04:38.060
Religion Foundation: James and Lauren. They saw this coming early, they made

0:04:38.060,0:04:44.180
sure that everybody was ready to go for when the remote work kicked in, so we

0:04:44.180,0:04:48.620
were able to transition pretty seamlessly. Our legal team started remote

0:04:48.620,0:04:51.770
work before anybody else and you know we would kind of have to be on the road a

0:04:51.770,0:04:55.930
lot anyway so that was the easy transition for us but yes we've been

0:04:55.930,0:05:01.130
remote for more than a month now and everything seems to be humming along very

0:05:01.130,0:05:05.000
nicely for the organization. Or at least as nicely as it can be when

0:05:05.000,0:05:09.770
everybody's scattered to the winds and locked indoors. (AL): We've seen elsewhere

0:05:09.770,0:05:14.690
that this crisis, like many others, has been used by the Religious Right as an

0:05:14.690,0:05:20.390
opportunity to advance what are their pre-existing policy preferences. So for

0:05:20.390,0:05:26.060
example targeting of abortion and LGBT rights, really from Poland to Brazil,

0:05:26.060,0:05:31.340
obstensibly linked to the need for lock downs that the same groups don't in

0:05:31.340,0:05:35.240
other contexts seem to be taking as seriously. Could you talk much about

0:05:35.240,0:05:39.590
the American context on that? (AS): We are seeing the same thing happen here

0:05:39.590,0:05:43.250
absolutely. You know there's a political saying here that

0:05:43.250,0:05:48.020
says "Never let a good crisis go to waste"
and the Religious Right really

0:05:48.020,0:05:51.410
seems to be taking advantage of that. And
the big areas that they're

0:05:51.410,0:05:57.350
focusing on still, or using the pandemic
to take advantage of, seems to be abortion

0:05:57.350,0:06:01.280
which you already mentioned. You know
there have been a lot of lawsuits back

0:06:01.280,0:06:06.380
and forth already in States that have
said: "Well we are enforcing 'stay at home'

0:06:06.380,0:06:09.380
orders and that includes abortion
clinics. Nobody can go get an abortion so

0:06:09.380,0:06:13.040
you have places like Texas and Louisiana,
Mississippi they're trying to do things

0:06:13.040,0:06:18.410
like that, Arkansas. And there's a lot of
litigation ongoing

0:06:18.410,0:06:21.470
about that pretty much every single day
we're hearing about another court

0:06:21.470,0:06:24.190
decision or an appeal something along
those lines.

0:06:24.190,0:06:33.290
Vouchers - so essentially this is
a way for taxpayer funds to flow into

0:06:33.290,0:06:39.740
private religious schools. We're
seeing a big attempt by Betsy Devos in

0:06:39.740,0:06:44.590
the Department of Education,

trying to use the stimulus money that

0:06:44.590,0:06:49.780
the Federal Government passed to send
that money to private religious schools

0:06:49.780,0:06:54.910
through various different kinds of
voucher schemes. Things like micro grants.

0:06:54.910,0:06:57.940
Without getting too into the weeds on
that - basically it's just a way for

0:06:57.940,0:07:01.930
public money to end up going to
religious schools in churches which is

0:07:01.930,0:07:05.410
something that's absolutely prohibited
under our Constitution. So those are two

0:07:05.410,0:07:09.340
of the big ones - abortion and vouchers -
and the biggest one that we're

0:07:09.340,0:07:13.690
seeing is you know - one of America's
founding principles is the separation of

0:07:13.690,0:07:19.090
State and Church and that really stemmed
from or part of it stemmed from this

0:07:19.090,0:07:24.280
idea that the government can't use its
coercive taxing power. (It can't) take that
money

0:07:24.280,0:07:29.050
from US citizens and then give it to a
religion with which you disagree.

0:07:29.050,0:07:34.390
Basically all religious support.
financial support, needs to be done

0:07:34.390,0:07:38.260
voluntarily.

You know we don't want to have Muslims

0:07:38.260,0:07:43.090

being forced to support Jewish synagogues, or Jewish synagogues or

0:07:43.090,0:07:47.320

Jewish citizens being forced to support mosques, or non-believers being forced to

0:07:47.320,0:07:52.810

support Christian churches, things like that. And in the stimulus package that

0:07:52.810,0:07:58.510

Congress has been passing they are allowing all of that money to flow to

0:07:58.510,0:08:04.419

churches and to preachers and pastors and clergy for their salaries, for their

0:08:04.419,0:08:09.520

mortgage payments, things like this and that is a massive hole in the great

0:08:09.520,0:08:12.970

American principle of separation of State and Church that a lot of the

0:08:12.970,0:08:16.720

groups, the Freedom From Religion Foundation included, are working overtime

0:08:16.720,0:08:22.330

to try to repair and try to stop that flow of public money. I mean that that is

0:08:22.330,0:08:25.930

an absolute betrayal of America's founding values and to me it's the

0:08:25.930,0:08:30.460

biggest example of what you just asked for - you know the religious right taking

0:08:30.460,0:08:35.440

advantage of this crisis - to afford their policy goals. (AL): That's very interesting. I

0:08:35.440,0:08:40.270

mean the voucher issue people may be familiar with it but that's not something

0:08:40.270,0:08:44.560

I've seen many of my American friends sharing on Facebook or Twitter that

0:08:44.560,0:08:49.089

that's an issue. We also have the same strict separation of Church and State in

0:08:49.089,0:08:54.100

the UK so we don't have the voucher issue because you know a third of

0:08:54.100,0:08:59.620

schools are state-funded faith schools. (AS): Yeah I mean and I would say that for the

0:08:59.620,0:09:04.660

most part it's probably flown under the radar here (US), the voucher issue. I heard a

0:09:04.660,0:09:08.649

couple of news stories about it yesterday and the day before. So I suspect people

0:09:08.649,0:09:12.009

will start to wake up more to it. You know the Freedom From Religion

0:09:12.009,0:09:15.339

Foundation and a bunch of our coalition partners signed a letter that we sent to

0:09:15.339,0:09:21.519

Congress on April 20th I believe it was. That should start

0:09:21.519,0:09:24.880

working its way into the news and there are other things too that you know I

0:09:24.880,0:09:27.519

haven't even had a chance to verify. For instance right before we

0:09:27.519,0:09:30.399

started to record this, and I hesitate to mention it because I haven't had to run

0:09:30.399,0:09:34.480

it down, I saw that the Department of

Health and Human Services, which is a

0:09:34.480,0:09:40.120

Federal Department said it is trying to pass a rule, apparently, again take this

0:09:40.120,0:09:45.970

with a grain of salt, that health care workers don't have to treat trans or

0:09:45.970,0:09:50.800

perhaps other LGBT patients that may be infected with Covid-19 on the basis of

0:09:50.800,0:09:59.019

their religion. Which I mean is absolutely immoral and also

0:09:59.019,0:10:03.069

a really good way to continue to spread the disease. So that's something that

0:10:03.069,0:10:06.759

we're going to be looking into and obviously that's another one of

0:10:06.759,0:10:10.959

the policy goals of the Religious Right. And you know if we had to sum it up

0:10:10.959,0:10:14.860

what you're really, a fight that we've been engaged in here in the United

0:10:14.860,0:10:18.790

States for the past decade or two, with this attempt to redefine

0:10:18.790,0:10:23.680

religious liberty, to weaponize religious liberty to turn it into - not a right to

0:10:23.680,0:10:28.360

protect you from the government - but a weapon to impose that religion on other

0:10:28.360,0:10:34.029

people. The best way to sum that up is that Christian nationalists in this

0:10:34.029,0:10:41.170

country have been seeking to make themselves a special favoured class and

0:10:41.170,0:10:44.949

relegate everybody else to this second class citizen rate. And that's really

0:10:44.949,0:10:48.939

what you're seeing happening with all of these different policy pushes even in

0:10:48.939,0:10:53.319

the midst of this pandemic. (AL): That's terrible, this is the idea

0:10:53.319,0:10:57.759

of denying health care on religious grounds. It's sadly something

0:10:57.759,0:11:02.649

that some of our friends in India have spoken about with the so-called lower

0:11:02.649,0:11:07.510

caste or Untouchables routinely not having access to

0:11:07.510,0:11:11.860

health care because doctors tend to be more socially economically advanced anyways and

0:11:11.860,0:11:16.480

all more likely to be so-called 'upper caste'. (AS): I mean it really is to

0:11:16.480,0:11:24.010

me: it's one of the most nightmarish issues out there. I mean the

0:11:24.010,0:11:33.730

idea that you have a right to not help a fellow human being because of who they

0:11:33.730,0:11:39.820

are, to not try to save their life. To me it really exposes some of the bedrock

0:11:39.820,0:11:46.360

immorality the 'Us/them/the other' rising that religion engages in

0:11:46.360,0:11:51.160
and how deadly it truly
can be. (AL): I mean I suppose linked to that is
that

0:11:51.160,0:11:56.740
some faith groups have grabbed headlines
by breaking or demanding exemptions to

0:11:56.740,0:12:01.330
social distancing. For instance I know
there was some controversy regarding a

0:12:01.330,0:12:05.800
mass funeral in New York over the last
few days? And I've just been sent

0:12:05.800,0:12:10.900
this morning an article from Pew
Research Council, Pew Research Center,

0:12:10.900,0:12:16.360
suggesting that a majority of US states
have religious exemptions to social

0:12:16.360,0:12:20.320
distancing laws. (AS): And this is one of the
things that we've been trying to work on

0:12:20.320,0:12:24.430
at the Freedom From Religion Foundation. So
early in this process I want to say

0:12:24.430,0:12:30.040
about mid-March we sent a letter to
every Governor of every one of the 50

0:12:30.040,0:12:38.140
States explaining that there is no reason
to exempt churches from 'stay at home' or

0:12:38.140,0:12:42.970
social distancing orders. So first we're
saying religious freedom doesn't require

0:12:42.970,0:12:48.610
this. Second these exemptions would
unconstitutionally favour churches and

0:12:48.610,0:12:53.770

third, that the exemptions are immoral
and deadly. So we sent those letters in

0:12:53.770,0:12:58.240
mid-March and quite a few of the
Governors, a little less than half as you

0:12:58.240,0:13:02.620
mentioned, have agreed and done the right
thing and imposed these orders on their

0:13:02.620,0:13:07.710
States and said that they apply to
churches. And quite a few have not,

0:13:07.710,0:13:13.830
including places like Florida and Ohio,
and we've been trying to work with those

0:13:13.830,0:13:19.730
governments to
explain that this really is a huge

0:13:19.730,0:13:22.940
problem and it's not something you have
to do. I mean the first thing

0:13:22.940,0:13:25.880
that everybody needs to
understand is there is no legal reason

0:13:25.880,0:13:34.130
to exempt churches from these orders. The
the conventional wisdom out there is

0:13:34.130,0:13:36.860
that:
"Well these churches have a religious

0:13:36.860,0:13:42.770
right to worship as they see fit, that
this is situated in the First Amendment

0:13:42.770,0:13:46.850
to the US Constitution". And that's true:
Americans have rights to worship and

0:13:46.850,0:13:52.460
they have rights to assemble but neither
of those rights is unlimited. And that's

0:13:52.460,0:13:55.250
the problem that we're running into
right here. Everybody's assuming that: "I

0:13:55.250,0:13:59.360
have that right so I get to do it no
matter what", and that's not true. Neither

0:13:59.360,0:14:03.020
of those rights to worship and assemble
includes the right to risk other

0:14:03.020,0:14:08.120
people's lives. And that's I think what the
big misunderstanding here is. Everybody

0:14:08.120,0:14:13.250
assumes: "If I have this right it is
unlimited", and that's just absolutely not

0:14:13.250,0:14:17.390
true. And in fact every right that we
possess as American citizens, with the

0:14:17.390,0:14:22.490
exception of one, is limited and can and
should be limited. You know we have

0:14:22.490,0:14:26.150
freedom of speech but that doesn't
include the right to defame other people

0:14:26.150,0:14:30.860
or to threaten other people. You have
freedom of speech but you're prohibited

0:14:30.860,0:14:35.720
in the United States from telling people
who to vote for within a certain number

0:14:35.720,0:14:40.160
of feet of polling places. So you know
you have to be a thousand feet away from

0:14:40.160,0:14:45.320
a polling place before you can engage in
political speech. And the same holds for

0:14:45.320,0:14:49.700
the right to assemble in worship. You
have the right to worship but you don't

0:14:49.700,0:14:54.980
have the right to jeopardize public
health by doing so. And that's the big

0:14:54.980,0:15:00.170
disconnect that's the sort of the big
public education push that we've been

0:15:00.170,0:15:06.770
when trying to do here. (AL): I think British
and European secularists often look with

0:15:06.770,0:15:12.800
jealousy on the United States and you're
very clear First Amendment because I get

0:15:12.800,0:15:16.760
the closest equivalent we have is our
Article 9 Protection of Religious

0:15:16.760,0:15:20.780
Freedom or Freedom of Belief but
actually this might be a situation where

0:15:20.780,0:15:25.520
maybe our constitutional set-up might
be a little bit better from a secular

0:15:25.520,0:15:28.490
perspective because Article 9 The
protection of thought, religion and conscience

0:15:28.490,0:15:33.320
explicitly makes clear that that's a

0:15:33.320,0:15:38.899
limited right and in fact public safety
is one of the explicit enumerated

0:15:38.899,0:15:44.600
areas where your right to freedom
of religion and belief can be restricted.

0:15:44.600,0:15:50.149
(AS): And this is something that our court
system has dealt with many times in the

0:15:50.149,0:15:54.640
past. The Supreme Court of the
United States has said explicitly that

0:15:54.640,0:15:59.779
Society and other citizens have a greater interest in stopping the spread

0:15:59.779,0:16:05.180
of, for instance, smallpox than one individual does in having the right

0:16:05.180,0:16:09.230
to worship as they see fit. And that was from a 1905 case.

0:16:09.230,0:16:13.100
So they've regularly rejected these challenges but you're right if you look

0:16:13.100,0:16:16.940
at the plain language of the First Amendment - not that many Americans

0:16:16.940,0:16:22.760
actually do that - you would assume that you have this absolute right to worship

0:16:22.760,0:16:26.630
as you see fit, and again that's just not true. The only absolute right we

0:16:26.630,0:16:30.649
possess under this system is the right to think freely. You can think and

0:16:30.649,0:16:35.000
believe whatever you want without limitation. But you don't have the right

0:16:35.000,0:16:38.750
to act on those beliefs without limitation and that's the disconnect

0:16:38.750,0:16:43.490
we've got here right now. (AL): There are just many areas where religious groups and

0:16:43.490,0:16:47.690
particularly the more privileged religious groups just aren't used to

0:16:47.690,0:16:56.570
having the law apply equally to them. You

may have noticed this. (AS): Uhuh. (AL): Is this crisis

0:16:56.570,0:17:01.640
just a step too high? Does it just have to be a reckoning, a moment

0:17:01.640,0:17:07.819
when you know perhaps the language of the way in which it is expressed could be a

0:17:07.819,0:17:13.550
bit clunky but we just need to say: "No the law applies to everyone". If you can't

0:17:13.550,0:17:19.160
get 10 people together you know can't get 10 people to together for a movie

0:17:19.160,0:17:23.750
night then you can't get 10 people together for a church evening. (AS): I think

0:17:23.750,0:17:29.990
you're right, and I think there is this, there's a very deep-rooted sense of

0:17:29.990,0:17:37.040
entitlement for Christian, white American Christians, and especially if they are

0:17:37.040,0:17:40.790
conservative evangelicals and especially under the current administration which

0:17:40.790,0:17:44.520
speaks their language and tells them they're special and tells

0:17:44.520,0:17:50.450
them that the government is working for them, not for everybody else. So the end: a

0:17:50.450,0:17:56.370
sense of entitlement is bad enough but when you pair it with faith and religion

0:17:56.370,0:18:01.920
I think it really does become lethal. And that's the other big education

0:18:01.920,0:18:07.950

push we've been trying to do here is:
"Look, declaring that you have a

0:18:07.950,0:18:11.670

right to worship right now is immoral
and it's not only immoral it's lethal".

0:18:11.670,0:18:15.900

And there's a lot of data to back
this up. In Sacramento County California,

0:18:15.900,0:18:20.760

which is where the state capital of
California is, one third of all Covid

0:18:20.760,0:18:28.080

cases were traced to church services. In
South Korea 60% of all cases traced back

0:18:28.080,0:18:32.580

to one Church cluster. One
worshipper attended two services

0:18:32.580,0:18:39.410

and infected 1,200 people. A single church
in France kicked off the biggest cluster,

0:18:39.410,0:18:43.680

2,500 confirmed cases were linked to it. You
had worshippers who went

0:18:43.680,0:18:47.970

to Burkina Faso, Corsica, Latin
America, Switzerland elsewhere from that

0:18:47.970,0:18:53.160

one cluster. And then even in small
places like Lea County, Alabama which is

0:18:53.160,0:18:58.620

a pretty rural county in the American
South, health officials blamed Church

0:18:58.620,0:19:03.930

gatherings with as few as 10 people for
a massive surge in new cases there. That

0:19:03.930,0:19:08.580

County had more than all the surrounding
counties combined because of it. So the

0:19:08.580,0:19:16.320

data very very clearly shows that
churches in particular are contributing

0:19:16.320,0:19:24.090

to the spread of this pandemic and it is
something that we really ought to, that

0:19:24.090,0:19:26.910

message is something that we really need
to do I think a little bit better job of

0:19:26.910,0:19:31.860

explaining. So it helps to push back on
their sense of entitlement."You have this

0:19:31.860,0:19:36.200

and you feel entitled and you are
actually killing people because of it."

0:19:36.200,0:19:43.080

(AL): Yes obviously people of any faith or
non individuals can act irresponsibly or

0:19:43.080,0:19:48.990

selfishly: it's the the blending of that
with us backed by a sense of

0:19:48.990,0:19:53.190

entitlement because an individual
breaking the rules kind of maybe feels

0:19:53.190,0:19:56.039

that they have been a bit in the wrong but if
you've got the entitlement

0:19:56.039,0:20:01.950

and the privilege you feel like: "No, this is
my religious freedom to cough on you". (AS):
Yes I

0:20:01.950,0:20:06.809

think that was well put and
and that, that is, I don't want to say

0:20:06.809,0:20:11.279

it's a uniquely American problem, but it
does it does seem to be exacerbated here,

0:20:11.279,0:20:17.369

with the American sense of entitlement and liberty and freedoms that many many

0:20:17.369,0:20:25.859
citizens feel. (AL): It's a very strange thing to say: I mean three months ago you

0:20:25.859,0:20:29.820
as a Church/State separation activist. Could you have imagined, you know us

0:20:29.820,0:20:34.739
as secularists and liberals, could we have imagined that we'd be wanting the

0:20:34.739,0:20:41.099
state to order religious services to close? Obviously not. Yes it's the extreme

0:20:41.099,0:20:45.149
circumstance and it's because we're not ordering 'religious' services, that it's the

0:20:45.149,0:20:51.389
'everyone's' services. (AS): And that's the that's the thing that a lot of people

0:20:51.389,0:20:55.679
aren't grasping, including I should say judges here in the United States. You

0:20:55.679,0:21:05.279
know it really is a blanket order imposing this on everyone and

0:21:05.279,0:21:10.080
we had a judge in Kentucky, guy named Justin Walker, who should not be a judge.

0:21:10.080,0:21:14.429
He was rated as unqualified when he was nominated by Trump and he only took the

0:21:14.429,0:21:19.379
bench a couple of months ago. There was a church challenging one of these

0:21:19.379,0:21:24.479
'stay at home' orders and he wrote: "On Holy Thursday (so the Thursday before Easter)

0:21:24.479,0:21:31.559
an American mayor criminalized the communal celebration of Easter". You know

0:21:31.559,0:21:40.139
and that's a judge characterizing the government as criminalizing religion. And

0:21:40.139,0:21:43.590
this is a government that's trying to navigate a pandemic, to use science and

0:21:43.590,0:21:47.729
health to combat this lethal contagion while still recognizing that people have

0:21:47.729,0:21:53.460
constitutional rights. So at best this judge: he deliberately conflated at best

0:21:53.460,0:21:59.099
a well-meaning violation of the religious right to free exercise, with a

0:21:59.099,0:22:04.379
deliberate and dystopian religious persecution. At worst he is too blinded

0:22:04.379,0:22:09.480
by his Christian nationalism to understand the difference between

0:22:09.480,0:22:15.330
persecution and not being persecuted because of that sense of entitlement. So it

0:22:15.330,0:22:19.620
really is something, that sense of entitlement we've been talking about,

0:22:19.620,0:22:25.740
really is something that is impacting on every aspect of the coronavirus response

0:22:25.740,0:22:31.620
here in the United States I think. (AL): A friend of mine said this morning there was an article

0:22:31.620,0:22:38.250
about LGBT Pride being cancelled

and how upset they were about that but

0:22:38.250,0:22:43.500

knowing and seeing that, that's a necessary thing. And my heart does

0:22:43.500,0:22:48.290

genuinely go out to people to whom religion is important who are unable to

0:22:48.290,0:22:53.610

meet in communion with others just as it does to anyone who's, you know: "I should

0:22:53.610,0:22:57.450

be having a lovely trip up to Edinburgh tomorrow to play Dungeons and Dragons"

0:22:57.450,0:23:03.960

That's not gonna happen and I feel upset about that but it's this idea that it's

0:23:03.960,0:23:10.140

persecution for you to not get your way. I'm not sure how best to

0:23:10.140,0:23:14.309

characterize that. Is that simply religious privilege is it a sort of

0:23:14.309,0:23:20.760

hyper individualism and is that just part of the American DNA? (AS): I mean I

0:23:20.760,0:23:25.040

really think we have to tie that too, I really think there is a big part of that

0:23:25.040,0:23:30.480

that is due to the Christian persecution complex here in the United States. And

0:23:30.480,0:23:35.750

this is something that I've written about fairly regularly. There is a

0:23:35.750,0:23:40.380

theological element to American Christianity certainly that suggested

0:23:40.380,0:23:46.470

you as Christians are persecuted. But here in America Christians are you know

0:23:46.470,0:23:51.059

I mean among the most privileged citizens. You know, their God shows

0:23:51.059,0:23:55.110

up on our money, on our public buildings there are Bibles in every hotel room that

0:23:55.110,0:23:59.190

you go to. So even with that separation of State and Church they

0:23:59.190,0:24:05.340

still enjoy an immense amount of privilege BUT they PREACH that they are

0:24:05.340,0:24:12.150

going to be persecuted for their beliefs. And there's to me is even long

0:24:12.150,0:24:15.600

before this pandemic and these government orders ,there was this

0:24:15.600,0:24:22.460

yearning in American Christians to be persecuted and I think this is

0:24:22.460,0:24:29.240

sort of the realization of that fantasy for them. So they are misconstruing these

0:24:29.240,0:24:34.790

blanket orders that apply to everyone and apply to everything as persecution

0:24:34.790,0:24:40.700

of them in particular. And you know I mean you're right yeah: I have a book out

0:24:40.700,0:24:46.160

and I'm supposed to be on a book tour. I have had to cancel six events so

0:24:46.160,0:24:53.030

far you know including a couple really big ones. So it's something

0:24:53.030,0:24:56.810
that's affecting everybody but they are taking it more personally and I really

0:24:56.810,0:25:05.750
think, I don't think we can disentangle that from their theology. They've been

0:25:05.750,0:25:09.260
told every Sunday for year after year after year that they're going to be

0:25:09.260,0:25:13.460
persecuted for their beliefs and they see this happening and say: "Here it

0:25:13.460,0:25:19.580
is". (AL): We've mostly talked about the contents there of majoritarian groups. I

0:25:19.580,0:25:24.230
wanted to get maybe briefly get your thoughts on more minority or insular

0:25:24.230,0:25:28.430
religious groups that we have seen being hotspots for the outbreaks.

0:25:28.430,0:25:34.310
You mentioned South Korea. I know there's been some evidence also in India that

0:25:34.310,0:25:38.870
some Muslim groups have been outbreak hotspots and I'm almost hesitant to say

0:25:38.870,0:25:44.300
that because I do know the Hindu religious Right are using this crisis in

0:25:44.300,0:25:50.120
many areas to continue to target and harass minority religious groups. (AS): Yes I

0:25:50.120,0:25:53.300
don't think I certainly don't think it's limited to Christianity. You already

0:25:53.300,0:25:59.980
mentioned in New York City there are a number of Orthodox Jewish enclaves that

0:25:59.980,0:26:06.710
have had serious outbreaks and we're not even sure to the extent how bad they

0:26:06.710,0:26:11.720
are. That funeral you mentioned was for one of the Orthodox rabbis in one of

0:26:11.720,0:26:19.750
these communities and that led Mayor de Blasio of New York City to tweet out a:

0:26:19.930,0:26:24.770
it was let's just say it was it was not, he didn't choose his words as carefully

0:26:24.770,0:26:30.800
as he should have. I think he was pretty angry and it was an ill-considered tweet.

0:26:30.800,0:26:35.450
But the point that he's trying to make is these orders and the 'stay at home'

0:26:35.450,0:26:37.860
should apply to everybody regardless of your religion.

0:26:37.860,0:26:44.220
And we've also seen other examples of governments trying to accommodate

0:26:44.220,0:26:50.520
religion in ways that are legally problematic under our Constitution. For

0:26:50.520,0:26:56.850
instance there's a city in Minnesota that is, because of the pandemic, allowing

0:26:56.850,0:27:01.710
mosques to broadcast their call to prayer five times a day over

0:27:01.710,0:27:05.820
loudspeakers in violation of the noise ordinances. Which they have not been

0:27:05.820,0:27:10.620
allowed to do and there's no

real logical reason to suggest that they

0:27:10.620,0:27:14.670

need to be calling people to prayer in the middle of the pandemic anyway. And

0:27:14.670,0:27:18.030

this you know these happen at dawn so they're waking every citizen who can

0:27:18.030,0:27:22.290

hear it up so you know we're trying to address that issue and say: "Hey look

0:27:22.290,0:27:26.190

just because there's a pandemic on doesn't mean you all of a

0:27:26.190,0:27:30.810

sudden get to to violate the law in other ways". So it's not something that is

0:27:30.810,0:27:34.110

just strictly American Christians it's just that they happen to be the majority

0:27:34.110,0:27:39.420

in this country, they happen to feel more entitled than all the other religious

0:27:39.420,0:27:46.500

groups as a result, and they do have that that theology of persecution that

0:27:46.500,0:27:54.120

they've been waiting on for you know decades. (AL): It's sometimes a crisis

0:27:54.120,0:27:59.960

comes along and a problem that people have been complaining about before - so secularists

0:27:59.960,0:28:04.950

separation activists have long complained about exemptions and special

0:28:04.950,0:28:09.870

treatment in the law and some people might just take a view that, :
"Well you

0:28:09.870,0:28:14.400

know just let them get on with it, what's the harm?". When the

0:28:14.400,0:28:20.430

harm begins to be illustrated in this tragically graphic way then perhaps we

0:28:20.430,0:28:24.210

need to revisit that. (AS): Absolutely and you know there's great examples of

0:28:24.210,0:28:28.020

that. Well I shouldn't say great, there's awful examples of that all across the

0:28:28.020,0:28:31.920

United States right now. There's a pastor in Louisiana who refuses to abide by

0:28:31.920,0:28:38.790

these orders and has been holding worship services regularly and slowly

0:28:38.790,0:28:42.270

one by one we're seeing news stories about you know people in his

0:28:42.270,0:28:49.050

congregation, his personal lawyer, who have contracted the disease. There's a pastor

0:28:49.050,0:28:53.309

in Florida, Rodney Howard-Browne who violated local

0:28:53.309,0:28:58.470

rules prohibiting large gatherings. You know and this guy's

0:28:58.470,0:29:01.860

just a pious scoundrel. He's not just spreading the virus but also

0:29:01.860,0:29:06.240

misinformation. This is a guy who has said it's okay to worship in his church

0:29:06.240,0:29:11.250

because he has 13 machines there that

will kill the virus in the place. Which
0:29:11.250,0:29:15.450
is obviously not true. He's preached that
people who have enough faith will see
0:29:15.450,0:29:22.169
their rolls of toilet paper multiply. Now,
which is also untrue and this is that is
0:29:22.169,0:29:29.309
the guy that the Florida governor,
Governor de Santis, changed the
0:29:29.309,0:29:33.570
"stay at home" order for. Because Rodney
Howard-Browne was arrested and charged
0:29:33.570,0:29:37.620
for violating the local rules, the
Governor of the State stepped in and
0:29:37.620,0:29:42.090
said: "No no churches are exempt across
the State and this preempts all your
0:29:42.090,0:29:49.409
local rule", to get this scoundrel off. So
you know let's just
0:29:49.409,0:29:52.500
say these are the extreme examples -
obviously there are many many
0:29:52.500,0:29:56.399
well-meaning people and in most of the
churches in the United
0:29:56.399,0:30:01.320
States. There was a, there was a study I
want to say I think it was like I think
0:30:01.320,0:30:05.010
it was more than two thirds I don't
recall the exact figure off the top of
0:30:05.010,0:30:07.919
my head, more than two-thirds of the
churches not only agreed with these
0:30:07.919,0:30:14.899

orders but were scrupulously trying to
follow them. So you know - these are
0:30:14.899,0:30:21.360
maybe not outliers but they are the
certainly the more newsworthy examples I
0:30:21.360,0:30:26.909
guess we'll say. (AL): Something we've had a
lot of feedback about over the last
0:30:26.909,0:30:33.029
couple of weeks, particularly around one
case which we helped expose, is religious
0:30:33.029,0:30:39.029
miracle cures, that whole area of pseudo
medicine, and I think there's a
0:30:39.029,0:30:45.450
perception that the US has more of a
culture of shall we say 'entrepreneurial'
0:30:45.450,0:30:51.929
religion. And I know that you've talked
about some of these miracle
0:30:51.929,0:30:56.640
cure sales going on in the previous
answer about the church with the sort of
0:30:56.640,0:31:00.970
magic machines blocking the Covid
virus. (AS): Yes.
0:31:00.970,0:31:06.220
(AL): And we've seen also that there's sort of
hesitancy to take on religious groups
0:31:06.220,0:31:10.870
doing this in a way that if just a
run-of-the-mill pseudo medicine non
0:31:10.870,0:31:16.210
related to religious group might be shut
down. Is the crisis again an example
0:31:16.210,0:31:21.460
there just needs to be a reckoning for
this? Is this being cracked down on? (AS): It

0:31:21.460,0:31:26.080
actually is here in the United States
which to me was very surprising you know.

0:31:26.080,0:31:31.870
Typically the government leaves religion
alone when it comes to these kind of

0:31:31.870,0:31:38.710
miracle cure things and hawking their
their nonsense cures or nonsense

0:31:38.710,0:31:45.820
medicine but when the coronavirus
pandemic really started taking off and

0:31:45.820,0:31:51.630
started alarming the government, we saw
televangelists here in the States

0:31:51.630,0:31:56.020
promoting their cures. Something like
silver nitrate and look this will

0:31:56.020,0:32:01.330
cure you. And both in New York and in
Arkansas the Attorney General sent

0:32:01.330,0:32:04.840
letters to these televangelists and said:
"If you continue to do this we're gonna

0:32:04.840,0:32:08.590
bring you up on fraud charges and you're
gonna spend a serious amount of time in

0:32:08.590,0:32:13.180
jail". And I've been doing State/
Church stuff for a decade on from the

0:32:13.180,0:32:17.320
law side and I've never seen anything
like that yeah and it put a quick stop

0:32:17.320,0:32:23.110
to a lot of this. So it means it was
pretty fascinating to see that that hard

0:32:23.110,0:32:28.570
response against these churches in the
wake of this pandemic. I had never seen

0:32:28.570,0:32:32.590
anything like that. So that was new and
in my mind certainly a positive

0:32:32.590,0:32:38.890
development. (AL): Are they being accused of
being jackbooted fogs destroying

0:32:38.890,0:32:45.160
religious freedom? (AS): (Laughs)I'm sure I'm
sure they are. I have I sadly don't spend too
much

0:32:45.160,0:32:51.670
time watching the televangelists these
days. (AL): Well Andrew, thank you so much
for joining

0:32:51.670,0:32:56.620
us. You've given us just so much to
think about and reflect on. Before you go

0:32:56.620,0:32:59.418
is there anything you'd like to plug?

0:32:59.418,0:33:00.250
(AS): Yeah please

0:33:00.250,0:33:03.760
take a look at my book, 'The Founding Myth -
Why Christian Nationalism is not

0:33:03.760,0:33:06.250
American'. If you enjoyed this
conversation a lot of this stuff

0:33:06.250,0:33:11.830
actually at least from the philosophical
level is in 'The Founding Myth' and

0:33:11.830,0:33:14.620
then I'm on social media if you've
got other questions,

0:33:14.620,0:33:19.510
feel free to find me at Andrew L Seidel
on pretty much all the

0:33:19.510,0:33:24.370
platforms. Come, come find me and let's

chat. (AL): Well thanks so much so you stay

0:33:24.370,0:33:36.190

safe. (AS): You too thank you. (EP): I'm now joined by Alastair again and we're going to

0:33:36.190,0:33:41.320

reflect on his interview with Andrew Siedel and the very interesting

0:33:41.320,0:33:47.860

issues which that raises. Alistair, first of all, there's an interesting paradox I

0:33:47.860,0:33:52.660

think in the relationship between the state of secularism in the US and the UK

0:33:52.660,0:33:58.420

because on the one hand the US does have a secular Constitution and it was

0:33:58.420,0:34:03.429

specifically designed as such, unlike the UK, but yet there's the paradox that the

0:34:03.429,0:34:09.580

US today is a much more religious society than the UK is. Any thoughts as

0:34:09.580,0:34:14.320

to why that might be? (AL): I think so I think that's quite a big

0:34:14.320,0:34:21.250

topic and there are two large competing hypotheses over that. So I'm

0:34:21.250,0:34:24.820

moving to all the time to dive deeply into that but it's worth

0:34:24.820,0:34:31.110

remembering that constitutions and practices can vary quite widely.

0:34:31.110,0:34:36.129

There are countries that have you know very strong secularist constitutions

0:34:36.129,0:34:40.720

and yet there are dominant religious groups, there's

0:34:40.720,0:34:45.100

extreme religious privilege and discrimination. Pakistan for example

0:34:45.100,0:34:52.270

founded as a secular republic. So that can vary quite widely. There

0:34:52.270,0:34:58.360

can also be a big difference between the culture of a country and its legal

0:34:58.360,0:35:04.420

institutions. So the UK as you say we have an established church, we

0:35:04.420,0:35:10.240

have formal religious privilege but religion plays quite a limited role in

0:35:10.240,0:35:15.970

many people's lives. (EP): Do you think there are

any lessons we can learn from the issues

0:35:15.970,0:35:19.500

facing the Freedom From Religion Foundation and other secular

0:35:19.500,0:35:25.270

organizations in the US and their way of dealing with religious influence and

0:35:25.270,0:35:27.410

religious lobbying in the US in the way we

0:35:27.410,0:35:32.540

approach similar religious lobbying in the UK? (AL): Definitely, there's always

0:35:32.540,0:35:37.820

stuff to learn from other countries or with our brother and sister

0:35:37.820,0:35:42.170

organizations around the world definitely. Specifically in the context

0:35:42.170,0:35:48.590
of Covid-19, I'd like to just reference
an article written by my colleague

0:35:48.590,0:35:53.360
Chris Sloggett near the beginning
of the lock down that was talking about

0:35:53.360,0:35:59.900
secular attitudes and laws and how they
are an asset against coronavirus. Because

0:35:59.900,0:36:05.510
we do see that where you have extreme
religious fanaticism or religious

0:36:05.510,0:36:10.280
privilege that can very much hinder the
fight against this

0:36:10.280,0:36:15.890
coronavirus and what I think
shows is this crisis is

0:36:15.890,0:36:23.270
highlighting an underlying problem that,
when there is when religion is

0:36:23.270,0:36:28.640
being privileged and religious ideas
being privileged over other people's

0:36:28.640,0:36:33.170
legal rights then that creates an
expectation that that will always be the

0:36:33.170,0:36:39.080
case. And sometimes it will not be, these
will not be issues that huge

0:36:39.080,0:36:45.590
people will not notice or necessarily care
about.
Secularists can sometimes be focused on

0:36:45.590,0:36:50.870
issues of religious privilege where
that's a harming of a rather small group or

0:36:50.870,0:36:56.810

where the harm is there but not
necessarily absolutely visible on the

0:36:56.810,0:37:03.470
surface. Whereas this crisis has brought
that, brought those issues right

0:37:03.470,0:37:09.140
to the surface talking about problems
with doctors being able to refuse

0:37:09.140,0:37:14.360
patients' care on religious grounds. That
is an area of law, an area that may be

0:37:14.360,0:37:17.840
kind of restricted and people have heard
about but they're not really sure how

0:37:17.840,0:37:21.650
much that's going on or where that's
going on or they might think: "Oh well you

0:37:21.650,0:37:26.000
know just let people let their religious
beliefs be privileged in that case". But

0:37:26.000,0:37:31.160
when you've got a real crisis on your hands.
(EP): These people may be
actually be dying if they're refused

0:37:31.160,0:37:35.870
treatment on religious grounds by a
doctor. (AL): And I want to be clear when I

0:37:35.870,0:37:39.950
said that when we have a real crisis on our
hands. For many people

0:37:39.950,0:37:43.100
who were less
privileged than us, this form of

0:37:43.100,0:37:47.150
discrimination is a daily crisis as well. What I'm
talking about is it bringing it to

0:37:47.150,0:37:52.580
the surface of the larger public's

consciousness and debate. (EP): And it strikes me

0:37:52.580,0:37:57.230

that one one aspect of what Andrew Seidel said was that in

0:37:57.230,0:38:03.830

America it's become very clear that this Covid crisis is partly about religion

0:38:03.830,0:38:08.240

versus science in a very fundamental sense. Do you put your religious faith

0:38:08.240,0:38:13.190

first or do you accept that science just sometimes is incompatible with

0:38:13.190,0:38:18.350

particularly strict religious views. (AL): As a committed secularist, I

0:38:18.350,0:38:23.960

would like to stay somewhat neutral on on that point. The thing I will

0:38:23.960,0:38:29.870

say is there will always be people who are motivated by their

0:38:29.870,0:38:34.790

religious faith to do tremendous good and people motivated by their religious

0:38:34.790,0:38:40.520

faith to do terrible harm. Secularism doesn't challenge the

0:38:40.520,0:38:45.170

religious belief but what secularism is, it puts in place a framework of

0:38:45.170,0:38:50.240

protections and rights to prevent your religious beliefs being

0:38:50.240,0:38:56.510

used to harm other people. And that principle applies, whatever your

0:38:56.510,0:39:01.910

beliefs are and in whatever the context. So we don't need to; if people

0:39:01.910,0:39:07.700

are motivated by their religious faith to have very anti-scientific ideas that may

0:39:07.700,0:39:11.540

be a social problem that people want to discuss. But as secularists what's

0:39:11.540,0:39:16.490

important to us is that those beliefs don't then manifest themselves in

0:39:16.490,0:39:21.440

ways which harm the rights of other people. (EP): Oh absolutely. It's a question of

0:39:21.440,0:39:25.550

balancing all these different rights as you say. And as Andrew made an

0:39:25.550,0:39:30.110

excellent point - which is that the right to freedom of belief or conscience is

0:39:30.110,0:39:35.300

absolute in the US Constitution and in general no one in a Western democracy

0:39:35.300,0:39:39.470

would say that anyone has the right to dictate to people what they believe. On

0:39:39.470,0:39:43.490

the other hand once you start talking about the manifestations of your

0:39:43.490,0:39:47.330

religious belief or the manifestations of your right to freedom of expression

0:39:47.330,0:39:52.970

- that's where both of these rights become limited by how far you can harm other

0:39:52.970,0:39:56.589

people by your religion expressional, by your freedom of speech.

0:39:56.589,0:40:03.410
(AL): Yes and you talked about their job at the FFRF, educating people about the

0:40:03.410,0:40:08.930
First Amendment to their constitution and what that actually means. And trying

0:40:08.930,0:40:13.789
to use that better education to challenge is a sort of absolutist idea

0:40:13.789,0:40:19.700
of: "My religion trumps everything else". We perhaps should also try and

0:40:19.700,0:40:23.930
do a good job of educating people about what our equivalent in the UK is, which

0:40:23.930,0:40:28.460
would be I would guess Article 9 of the Human Rights Act: Your right to freedom

0:40:28.460,0:40:34.759
of belief, conscience and thought. And similarly in fact in a much

0:40:34.759,0:40:41.029
more explicit way our Article 9 explains that is a limited right and you know we

0:40:41.029,0:40:46.819
even find within the text of Article 9 the fact that your freedom to

0:40:46.819,0:40:51.470
manifest.. You have the right to this thought, you have the right to think and believe and to

0:40:51.470,0:40:55.940
practise your religion. But the manifestation of that belief can be subject

0:40:55.940,0:41:01.999
to limitations as are necessary in a democratic society. (EP): And one of the particular

0:41:01.999,0:41:05.930

interpretations is the interests of public health, I believe, isn't it? (AL): Yes

0:41:05.930,0:41:14.930
public health, public order and and very importantly the phrase "or for the

0:41:14.930,0:41:20.630
protection of the rights and freedoms of others". (EP): Absolutely and I think another

0:41:20.630,0:41:25.999
thing to me that Andrew's discussion showed was the importance of

0:41:25.999,0:41:31.220
understanding the laws of your country. And of having lawyers or attorneys like

0:41:31.220,0:41:37.759
Andrew who can represent the views of secularists or humanists in court

0:41:37.759,0:41:42.529
and be there to know where the abuses of the Constitution are taking place and

0:41:42.529,0:41:45.559
challenge them because if you don't challenge them you're never going to get

0:41:45.559,0:41:55.339
the change you want. (AL): Absolutely. (EP): Alastair, thanks very much. (AL): Thanks so much.

0:41:56.130,0:42:01.270
That was Episode 25 of the National Secular Society podcast hosted by Emma

0:42:01.270,0:42:06.220
Park. The guest speakers were Andrew Seidel and Alastair Lichten. If you would like to

0:42:06.220,0:42:09.850
help us challenge unfair religious privilege and support freedom of and

0:42:09.850,0:42:14.650
from religion in Britain today, why not become a member of the NSS. Full details

0:42:14.650,0:42:20.020

are on our website at
secularism.org.uk/podcast. If you

0:42:20.020,0:42:23.770

liked this podcast you can find more
episodes and more information about this

0:42:23.770,0:42:28.320

episode on the website. Thanks for
listening.