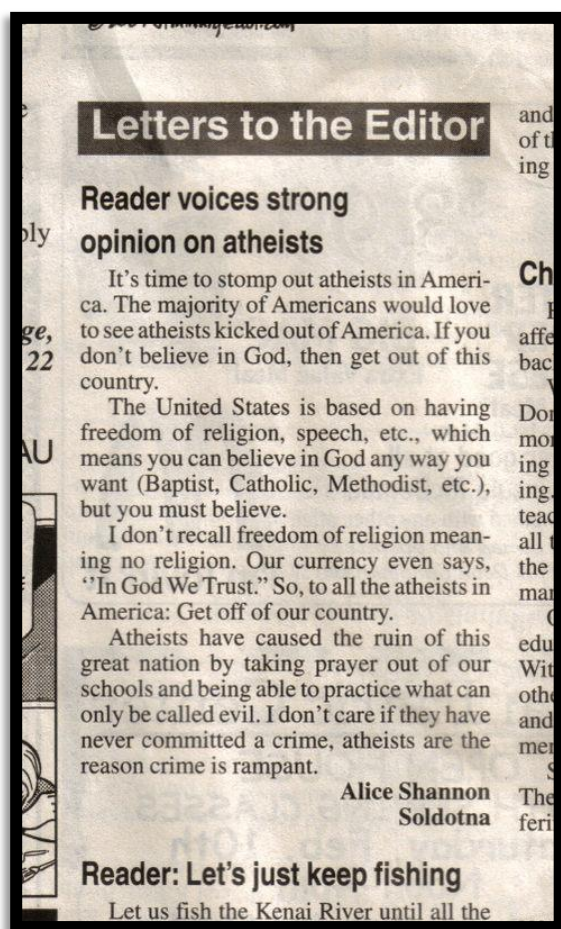


FREEDOMISM

Randomly generated opinions



Browsing the Internet one day, I discovered this amazing anti-atheist "letter to the editor" from a small city in Alaska. This piece has received much attention across the Internet as a symbol of ignorance and religious zealotry — it isn't the product of a copy of Photoshop, it is an actual published letter. Why any decent newspaper would allow this idiocy to be spread door-to-door is beyond me. While this person, Alice Shannon, is obviously terribly uneducated in Constitutional law and the basic history of the United States before 1800, and is probably just repeating a mantra that has been drilled into her head since childhood, this is a good piece of writing that I can take apart and examine, bit by bit, to counter some offensively naive arguments on behalf of the extreme right here in the United States against atheism and the non-religious.

Shannon's first argument is that the First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States requires that, in order to have a protected right to freedom of religion, you must at minimum hold some sort of belief. This terrible analysis of the Bill of Rights is so completely incorrect it amazes me that any citizen of the United States could be so uneducated to come to this conclusion. Any person who has read the First Amendment knows that the law does not require a belief in a god to receive the rights it establishes. The text reads: "*Congress* [expanded to the states and local governments via the Due Process Clause of the 14th amendment] *shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion* [that is, creating laws putting

one religion in a higher position or with more power than another], *or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*"

The Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment ("*...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...*") is the section that comes into play concerning Shannon's argument. As the Supreme Court has been flooded with religiously influenced court cases over the past 200 years, there is a much deeper legal scope to the First Amendment than there was when it was first drafted in 1791. Judicial review has expanded the First Amendment into the government's basic framework for the modern policy of separation of church and state. The Court has ruled that atheism and non-belief are protected by the First Amendment, in equal standing to other religions. The "free exercise" of religion gives the people the right to choose what religion, if any religion, to follow. Giving the federal government the power to regulate who has freedoms and who doesn't would defeat the purpose of a nation that prides itself on offering its residents a historically unprecedented assortment of rights. The hypocrisy of a person like Shannon, who is most likely a strong conservative who promotes "small" government, supporting such a discriminatory and invasive law reflects her incompetence. Never, in the history of the United States, has there been any governmental policy stating that the people "must believe". Such a law would be so unconstitutional it would be laughable.

The next argument shows that Shannon is mistaking secular government and freedom of religion. Separation of church and state disallows *government* from having any say in religious debate; prevents it from having any influence on anything related to religion. Such an influence would be dangerous, it would effectively discriminate against other beliefs and non-beliefs by putting one religious view above another. If the government of the United States were to be based solely on Christianity, this nation would resemble Iran, a tyrannical dictatorship where religion *is* government. The people of the United States are still and always will be free to practice whatever belief they want — that is freedom of religion — but we cannot have government back up one belief over others. Declaring things such as the National Day of Prayer unconstitutional is necessary; these religious invasions of government serve no purpose other than to promote belief, in this case prayer. Everyone is still free to pray individually at the end of the day, it has no adverse affect on freedom of religion.

As for "In God We Trust", that, like the phrase "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance, is just another piece of anti-Communist propaganda from the Red Scare/McCarthyism era. While I don't wholly agree, the Supreme Court has ruled "In God..." as a "symbolic" motto, and that "God" is not to be taken as a government endorsement of religion. Therefore, "In God We Trust" has no inherit meaning, it's just a "symbolic" motto. Also note the grammatical error "Get off of our country", it should be "Get out of our country".

Amazingly, atheists are *not* the group who battled and took down school prayer. In fact, many Jewish organizations and multiple Christian denominations — including the Amish, Jehovah's Witnesses and Roman Catholics — have been the most active forces against prayer in school. There are three landmark Supreme Court cases that resulted in the outlawing of school prayer: *Engel v. Vitale* (1962), *Abington School District v. Schempp* (1963) and *Lemon v. Kurtzman* (1971). *Vitale* was brought to court by three national Jewish unions and *Schempp* by a Unitarian Universalist. *Kurtzman* was not brought on due to prayer in schools, but whether or not local governments could reimburse private schools for teaching secular material. The funds were going to Catholic schools, a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment ("*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...*"). In this case, the Court established the basic guidelines for how public schools in the United States must be run, known as the *Lemon* test:

1. The government's actions must be secular;
2. The government must not have the effect of advancing one religious belief over another;
3. The government cannot become "excessively entangled" with religion.

Any violation of these standards is a violation of the First Amendment — this is the way it has been since 1971. Atheists have had practically *no* voice in any of these rulings, it was instead the angst of other religious groups that felt violated by the actions of government pushing religion onto their children that brought an end to school prayer. Another more recent case, *Santa Fe Independent School Dist. v. Doe* (2000), which declared school-sponsored prayer before high school football games unconstitutional, was brought on entirely by Catholics.

Labeling atheists — a group that makes up around 11% of the population and one that has an extremely small and unpopular political voice — as the primary cause of crime in the United States is an *extremely* far-reaching and objectionable assumption. Studies relating religion and crime in industrialized nations have been hard-pressed to find much of a connection, except one recent study by Gregory S. Paul in the *Journal of Religion and Society*, which found that areas of the United States that leaned more towards religion suffered from more social ills, such as crime.^[1] Still, this is a very statistical grey area, and it would be more reasonable and factual to come to the conclusion that wealth and class division are the reason crime is "rampant", not atheism.

There's a nagging feeling that I may have wasted my time writing this critical essay, knowing that Alice Shannon will probably never read this document, but I have covered many false assumptions that a disturbing proportion of the American public make. There are just too many hateful, discriminatory people like Shannon in the United States. They campaign endlessly against things they don't understand or have been brainwashed into thinking are bad, such as science and atheism. People like Shannon are the reason our government — which should be, in the

eyes of most on the right, "small" — can become so intrusive and "big" when it comes to religion. Small government isn't a policy that would only cover Wall Street and economic regulation, it would also mean less religion in government, less censorship, better privacy laws and more freedoms for the people. For some reason, the tea-partiers fail to grasp the concept of a totally reduced government, something they claim to endorse. Shrinking government in the financial sector is only half of a "smaller" federal power. The other half lies in our freedoms and rights, which must be expanded, not reduced. This is what the United States of America was founded on, after all.

CITATIONS

1. Paul, Gregory S.. "Cross-National Correlations of Quantifiable Societal Health with Popular Religiosity and Secularism in the Prosperous Democracies." *Journal of Religion and Society* 7 (2005): n. pag. *Journal of Religion and Society*. Web. 28 Apr. 2010.